Prima Facie

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Prima Facie

by TheBodyFarmer

Summary

Regret is not something Dr. Hannibal Lecter is accustomed to feeling, but it struck him the first night that Will Graham was unable to meet him at his usual appointment time due to his arrest for the copycat killings. After the sick man's escape from his medical transport, an opportunity arises for Hannibal--one where he is able to clear Will's name and shift his plans from trapping the profiler behind bars in order to preserve his own freedom to one where he can continue to foster a deep rooted codependency that would ensure Will's inability to leave him, even if he were to learn the truth of who Hannibal really is.

Notes

This is a canon-divergent fic that begins in the middle Season 1, Episode 13, timeline off slightly. It diverges from there, with elements and basic plot points from Season 2 to help drive the story forward.

luctus

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; THURSDAY, 08:35

The last few days have been long days for Hannibal Lecter. Unaccustomed to the feeling of unease, he spent his morning playing out his normal routine as if in a fog. He had awoken at his usual time but he had not felt alert. He had meticulously prepared himself his usual morning cup of French pressed coffee and had crafted a delicious, well presented, and healthy breakfast that he uncharacteristically left on his table, untouched after two bites. After showering and dressing, he gathered up his keys and drove to his office in a manner many had described to him in therapy sessions but until this day he had never experienced; one minute, he was backing out of his driveway and the next he was parking at work. Each red light would remain a mystery as to whether or not he had run them or stopped at them on learned instinct. He could not place where his mind had gone during his commute.

Hannibal had believed, wrongly, that he had gotten his emotions out during his talk with his therapist. Tears had flown freely in spite of his self-control, but he had lied to himself as much as he had lied to Dr. Du Maurier. Hannibal had become accustomed to having access to Will Graham and even he could not overcome one hundred thousand years' worth of human yearning for connection.

He had to admit now that he missed Will and he regretted what he had done to drive him so far, so quickly, in a vain attempt to protect his own self from detection.

The wanted man--a special agent with the FBI, wanted for at least four murders in connection to cases he had helped solve--had been missing for only two days after his escape from a medical transport van after his arrest. The first day had been easily handled. Hannibal spent his time speaking with Jack Crawford and Alana Bloom, discussing Will's altered state of mind, comparing clocks drawn, contemplating if the man had lied the entire time. Covering for himself, while helping to throw Will under the proverbial bus. He had relished the trust given to him by Jack and felt satisfied with the misdirection, the doubt in their star empathetic profiler and his findings that would hinder any future efforts to track him, hiding so snug under their nose.

The second day, Hannibal would describe as his own personal Hell.

Will had not come to him. Hannibal had believed that Will would have immediately come to see him after an escape. He had planned to convince Will that he was truly capable of the murders and that he alone could help him. He would break Will down, comfort him. He would then return him to Jack's control, where he would be placed in solitary confinement in the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane to await a trial already guaranteed to find him guilty. Hannibal would have to dispose of the director of the hospital, Frederick Chilton, and take his place eventually, but he would have Will to himself. No more field trips to Minnesota, to West Virginia, never again at the beck and call of another. No more threat of Will kissing Alana Bloom, of Alana choosing him over her professional integrity.

But Will is unpredictable. He had not come to him and during the separation, Hannibal realized that he could not face a world in which Will did not exist. Will, who could be shot in an attempt to escape arrest. Will, who could disappear into the woods until either his encephalitis or exposure to the elements claimed him. Will, who could choose to end his own life on his own terms, alone and afraid that he had done what he believed was inconceivable.

Hannibal let himself into his office. Autopilot allowed him to doff his coat and hang it, to move across the vast floor to his desk, to sit and pull out a book he would see but not read. It wasn't until Hannibal came back to himself, out of his thoughts, that he realized he could smell blood, stress, anxiety, a sweet heat.

He could smell *Will.*

The man looked up from his book and turned, his gaze immediately landing on the figure of Will, seated on the floor of the upper landing and hunched over, sweat-doused curls clinging to his palid forehead. Beautiful Will.

"Hello, Will," Hannibal said calmly. "How are you feeling?"

He watched as Will acknowledged him without looking down at him before the response came. "Self aware."

"You frightened Dr. Bloom," Hannibal said, choosing to appeal to Will's emotional connection with her.

"She's confused about who I am, which I can relate to," Will's words came out almost as measured as Hannibal's, but thick with emotion. "Are you confused about who I am?"

"I'm not confused. I'm skeptical. Meaning I'm willing to change my mind should the evidence change."

Will finally looked at Hannibal. Hannibal kept himself from reacting, something he found harder to do when it came to Will Graham, but it was not yet time for Will to discover anything new.

"Do you believe I killed Abigail?" Will asked.

"I believe it's entirely possible, if not nearly indisputable based on how you discovered her ear," Hannibal replied in a safe, non-judgmental way.

"If it was just Abigail, I would have believed. I would have believed I got so far inside Hobbs' head, I couldn't get out." Will's voice was firmer now. There was an edge to it that Hannibal wasn't sure whether to read as rage or desperation.

"But it wasn't just Abigail," he replied after a few beats of silence. It would be in his best interest if Will were to have an episode, to lose time. Perhaps he could push him towards it by pushing the narrative--

"I know who I am." Will interrupted Hannibal's thoughts.

Nevertheless, “All sense of who you are has been distorted by your illness. You know who you are in this moment. That isn’t always the case.”

“I didn’t kill any of them,” the desperation Hannibal thought he heard wasn’t; it was rage. Cold, angry rage at whoever was putting him in this position. Unknown to Will, it was towards Hannibal. A hurdle Hannibal would have to overcome in due time. “Someone is making sure no one believes me.”

Will is an unpredictably *smart* boy. Hannibal let out a sigh. Stepping back to show he is nonthreatening, he held an arm out towards the ladder to indicate Will should come down. “If we’re to prove you didn’t commit these murders, perhaps we should consider how you could have. And then disprove that.”

Carefully, Will rose from his position. Hannibal noted that Will’s body seemed tense, as if he’d been there waiting for a very long time. He admonished himself for not noticing as soon as he came into his office but if anyone were to get the upper hand on him, he would be proud for it to be Will. The fevered man made his way down the ladder, carefully, stiffly. Hannibal stepped towards him and when Will did not move to back away, he reached out to take Will’s wounded hand.

“I uh, needed one free hand,” Will said sheepishly. Hannibal studied his face, then with practiced hands and without warning, he popped Will’s thumb back into place. The man gasped and pulled his hand away, stretching his thumb and hissing through the discomfort. Eventually, calmer, he said, “Thank you. It’s … better. Thank you.”

“Have a seat. Would you like something to drink, Will?” Hannibal briefly placed his hand to Will’s back, nudging him towards the chairs where they often speak during their weekly conversations. Will pliantly followed the suggestion, moving to sit in his normal seat. Hannibal watched him, amazed at how small he looked, how unsure he looked in the prison jumpsuit he had yet to replace.

“Y-yes,” Will said as he settled, then as an afterthought he added a please and thank you. Hannibal crossed his office to the globe minibar he keeps, his back to Will in what the other would view as a sign of trust but Hannibal used as a shield. Two fingers of whiskey were poured into a glass, and a fizzing pill was dissolving within moments. He poured himself his own then returned to the chair, holding Will’s glass out to him. Will took it and nearly downed the entirety of it with one gulp before he stopped himself.

“No need to be shy, Will. You have been through much these last few days. I will find no offense in you drinking your fill,” Hannibal encouraged as he seated himself. He tipped his glass in the air to Will and sipped, and Will drank the last of his. “If you are this killer, that identity runs through these events like a thread through pearls. Cassie Boyle would have been your first victim. You said her crime scene was practically gift wrapped.”

Will weakly nodded, his eyes drifting from where Hannibal sat to the corner of the room. Hannibal watched as his blue eyes studied something he himself could not see. He wondered if it were a hallucination, Will’s fatigue, or the drug he’d just unwittingly taken already having an effect.

“It told me everything I needed to know to catch Garret Jacob Hobbs,” the man said, softly, eyes still studying what was not there.

“You’d seen one of Hobbs’ victims, you know how he killed. You may have been exploring how he killed to better understand who he was,” Hannibal suggested. He watched as again, Will’s eyes trailed across the room, although at a much duller pace. He was focused now on a wall and Hannibal could see his pupils dilate, could smell his fear rising.

“I wasn’t in Minnesota when Cassie Boyle was murdered,” Will countered, his voice still soft. The bite of rage had faded.

“She disappeared on a Saturday. Found on a Monday. You would have had the weekend to do your work,” Hannibal pushed now, his voice firmer than it had been before.

“I know I didn’t kill her,” the other argued weakly, his gaze still fixed on some horror playing out on the office wall solely for Will.

“How do you know?”

Will stood up abruptly then. His empty whiskey glass fell to the floor with a loud thud, but did not shatter, and rolled under his chair. Hannibal watched curiously as Will reached up and took his own head in his hands, gripping his hair, a pained look crossing his face. He was making noise as if he were trying to speak, but it came out unintelligible. Scared. He was panicking, his brain knowing something else is wrong, something new, something it didn’t want to handle on top of whatever hallucinations Will had become accustomed to. Hannibal continued watching as blue eyes rolled up and back, and he wondered if Will were to suffer another seizure; it would make keeping Will more difficult, as he would feel obligated to take him to the hospital where he would ultimately face arrest for the second time in so many days and this time before Hannibal could decide what exactly he wanted.

“Stop,” Will commanded, loud and fierce, before he turned to leave the office. Not a seizure then. Hannibal rose from his chair, set his glass down gently upon a table, and he followed Will several steps behind. Will made it as far as the door to the waiting room before he fell to the floor, taking the coat rack down with him, apologies slipping from his lips as he stared at Hannibal but spoke to Abigail.

“She is safe,” Hannibal reassured him. He helped Will stand, leaning him against the door as he gathered up his own coat from the floor. He wrapped it around the shorter man’s shoulders, tucking the collar up tight to his face. “Will, you must listen to me now. We are going to go outside. It will be bright and hard for you to see, but you must follow me as best as you can.”

“I didn’t kill Abigail,” Will said before he reached up over Hannibal’s head and pulled his hand back hard, as if he had touched something sharp. “What are you trying to tell me..?”

“That we must be careful. Quickly, Will,” Hannibal ushered him out of the door, through the waiting room. Will allowed himself to be led by a hand on the small of his back, his eyes wild as they darted from the stairs, to the street, to things Hannibal knew were not there. They made it to the Bentley where Hannibal tucked Will into the passenger seat, leaning over

him to buckle him in. He shut the door, careful not to harm the other, then made his way to the driver's side and got himself in and buckled. He took a moment to study Will, who was now slumped against the window, his breaths slow and deep.

Hannibal had Will now. Will who knew he was being framed. Will who was piecing each crime together, who most likely already suspected someone close to each case. Will who could make the jump from a cop, to an FBI agent, to Jack, to Hannibal. Will, who he mourned the loss of a day prior, who made him think of his life beyond birth and death. Will who was forcing him now to adjust his plans to satisfy his curiosities rather than to protect himself.

He pulled away from the curb, much more aware now than he had been on his drive into the office. He had just enough time to get Will home and settled before returning to the office for his first patient of the day, whose appointment he would have to cancel on a last minute notice. He would leave Will's glass overturned under his chair, leave the coat rack lain on its side, and he would call Jack to weave a tale of a sick man come to try and force his therapist to take him to Minnesota to prove his percieved innocence.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; THURSDAY, 09:52

The phone call had gone well. Jack Crawford had sounded relieved to learn of Hannibal's safety and predictably angry to learn of Will's supposed actions. Hannibal waited, patiently watching the clock as the hours passed before Jack and his team from the FBI could show up. When he knew their arrival drew near, he sat at his desk, much as he had while waiting to learn the fate of his dear Will after his trip to meet Tobias Budge, and looked mournfully at Jack's stern mug as he entered the room without even a knock. His worker bees followed him in, a few Hannibal could recognize, even fewer he cared to mind.

"Jack," Hannibal acknowledged him.

"Dr. Lecter," Jack returned the gesture, crossing the room to meet him. "I'm only here briefly. You mentioned he spoke of Minnesota. Do you believe he is capable of making it that far?"

Hannibal paused and took a moment to look around the room. The man known as Price was taking photographs of the door, the overturned coat rack. The woman--Beverly--was motioning for him to meet her by the chairs, where she pointed out the glass. Pictures were taken, then she carefully packed the glass away in an evidence bag. Good. They would get clear prints of Will's as soon as they went back to the lab.

"I believe he is and is not capable. He is slipping in and out of his episodes, and I fear he may be more capable than any of us have thought while he is lucid," Hannibal said, turning his attention back to Jack.

"He spoke of the Hobbs' home then?" Jack asked.

"Yes. He believes he is being framed. I believe that if Will is unable to find proof of his innocence there, he will move on to the other crimes he has been accused of. He may visit

Boyles' burial site, perhaps then he would even risk returning to Dr. Sutcliffe's office, or where Georgia Madchen was murdered."

"Did he attack you?" Jack had asked this over the phone, but he seemed to want to be sure of himself. Hannibal smiled at him. Jack is a man now doubting his own opinion, his own actions, and the answers he's given.

"No. He merely wanted my help to prove his perceived innocence," Hannibal offered. He frowned, then lowered his voice to speak again, "I did attempt to sedate him and they may find evidence of that in the glass he drank from. It was a desperate measure."

Jack mulled Hannibal's answer over as he turned to watch the crew work with what little there was. This would be a quick visit, as Hannibal had known. He would use this as an excuse to cancel with the rest of his patients for the day and return to Will.

"Do you think it's possible that Will is correct?" Jack asked finally. He did not acknowledge the attempt to drug Will and Hannibal knew that meant it would not be mentioned officially either.

"If he were correct in his suspicion that he is being framed, rather than grasping at paranoid delusions to maintain his innocence, then it would have to be someone close to him. Or to you, Jack," Hannibal said.

Jack frowned deeply. He turned and watched Hannibal for a moment with that calculating, cold look he often times had seen Jack giving Will. A man considering answers he doesn't want to consider. "Will said the same thing. Even claimed it could be me framing him."

"A man such as yourself could never do such a thing," Hannibal reassured.

"Sir, we're done here," one of the crew said.

"Get back to the lab," Jack began barking out. "Analyze everything as quickly and correctly as possible. Then prepare yourselves to ship out to Minnesota if I give the call."

Hannibal watched as the controlled chaos of FBI agents in his personal space began to dissipate. One by one they were gone, leaving him alone with Jack. The man tapped his knuckle on Hannibal's desk a few times as he let his own gaze drift over the office now familiar to so many in his circle.

"Do you want protection?" He asked finally.

"No. I don't believe it is necessary. If Will wanted to harm me, he would have," Hannibal said as he rose from his seat, his buttoning his suit jacket as he did. Jack reached out to shake his hand and Hannibal obliged. They walked silently together towards the office door. Hannibal enjoyed these moments, as rude as it was for Jack to barge in on him from time to time. A peaceful coexistence wherein Jack is ignorant of his true nature, trusting him. "Do be careful, Jack. If Will is in Minnesota it may trigger a violent episode, if he truly is acting as if he were Hobbs. I must ask for one favor though."

Jack watched him, waiting. Hannibal took a deep, unsteady breath in. He had to show remorse, fear. He went so far as to clench and unclench a hand, before bringing it to his waist to touch the button of his jacket. He allowed himself to fidget.

“I do consider Will a friend, and I would like to ask that you try your best to bring him back alive. We have all done a disservice to him. I believe he is owed a chance to recover from whatever has triggered this.”

The agent nodded and heaved a deep sigh, then set about buttoning his coat and preparing himself to leave. He made for the door and Hannibal opened it for him, gentlemanly as ever.

Before leaving, Jack turned to face him. “I will do everything in my power to ensure his safe return, Dr. Lecter. You have my word.”

Hannibal smiled at him and gestured a goodbye as the man left. Jack felt guilty and Hannibal had no qualms about pointing out that he had done him a disservice. He knew he was sending the man on a wild goose hunt, to look for a man states away when he was quietly tucked away mere minutes from where they currently stood. Jack had been useful in pushing Will over the edge; he is a selfish man, concerned more for his career and closing cases than those who work for him. But selfish men find a way to blame themselves when those they push fail, and Will’s current public downfall has been spectacular.

absens

BLOOMINGTON, MINNESOTA; FRIDAY 7:49PM

Stepping out of his rental car, Jack Crawford gently closed the door as quietly as possible. He had parked down the street from their target house to avoid his headlights being detected in the darkening evening, followed by a team of agents who he commanded to stay back until he signaled for them. He walked towards the Hobbs' residence, eyes sweeping the surrounding trees, the snow on the ground in search of fresh tracks, his gun drawn but kept at his side without his finger on the trigger. Once at the sliding door, he peered in through the glass, allowing his eyes to adjust to look for motion before he reached up to pop the police line tape off the doorframe. He checked the door--it was unlocked--then slid it open slowly, silently, before dipping inside.

The atmosphere was eerily still within the home. The electricity must have been turned off; there wasn't even a buzz of wires, no heat blowing from the vents.

Jack listened for the sound of voices, of breaths, of footsteps, but he heard nothing. He moved deeper into the home, careful not to lead with his firearm despite his training and experience. He had no desire to spook Will if he were there in the house. He had no desire to shoot him, murderer or not. Each room had been clear, full of nothing but silence and furniture.

He made his way then into the kitchen, where his eyes fell upon a large swath of blood smeared across the floor. Jack peered through the windows, walked over to look through the doorway just to check. No one. He walked back to the dried blood, trailing his gaze across the floor and up towards the fridge where he noticed one of the pictures turned back around, a smiling family portrait keeping vigil over what Jack could only assume was the blood of Abigail Hobbs where she had finally met her fate.

Jack reached into his pocket and pulled his radio out, bringing it to his mouth before pressing the button. "The house is clear. Bring in forensics. This is the murder site."

Before he even received an answer, he heard engines turn on and wheels crunching snow as his team moved towards the house. Jack heaved a deep sigh, holstering his gun and pocketing his radio. The blood was dry and he knew Will had to have killed her days ago when he brought her here to finish what Hobbs had started. He walked back to the door as agents began filing in and he motioned for two armed agents to follow him. He had a cabin to check. If Will weren't here then he would be in the cabin, if he were anywhere at all.

"Let's move out to the second location," he said to the two agents, before turning back to the house where forensics was already busy taking pictures, collecting samples. "Once you're done here, rendezvous at Hobbs' cabin. If Will isn't there, there will be more evidence."

With that, he and the two other agents headed out, they in their car, he in his own rental. Jack checked his cell phone before pulling out of the driveway, hoping for an update, a sighting, any clue as to where Will could be.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; FRIDAY 8:15PM

“At this moment, dear Will, Uncle Jack should be finding the blood stains that Abigail and I left in her father’s kitchen. They were meant to be a gift for you,” Hannibal paused then, studying the sweat soaked features of the sleeping man beside him. He’d been sedated since Hannibal brought him to his home and he’d been running a high fever that Hannibal hoped would break soon. He brushed wet curls from Will’s forehead and continued, “But I fear you’ve become more valuable than I had anticipated.”

Hannibal had brought Will to his home earlier in the day and in his haste to return to his office, he had left him lying on his couch in his study. It was a place Will had been before, where prints or hair would not be questioned if found. Jack had left the state, but Hannibal did not trust he would have no visitors during a time where colleagues are worried--Alana, scared on her own, or an acquaintance who heard from a friend of a friend that an escaped criminal had visited him in his office. He understood where their concerns would be coming from; he had spent many years creating a life around himself that, from an outside perspective, made him appear as if he were a well-rounded and enviable bachelor who achieved all he desired through effort and talent. For this reason, he would not fault any unannounced visitors, but he would still take precautions.

Hannibal walked from his study to his kitchen, carefully closing blinds along the way, until he reached his pantry. He unlocked the door and propped it open. He slid his butcherblock counter out of the way and lifted a panel from the floor, revealing the stairs leading to his basement. He made his way down, clicked on the lights, and lifted a keyring off the wall. His basement was his sanctuary, a place seen by no one who survived, and he had laid it out carefully in order to serve his needs. For now, it would be Will’s sanctuary within his own. He made his way in, past hung plastic, past metal tables, saws, chains, to one of the rooms he’d had built along the back wall. As Hannibal unlocked and unlatched the door, he paused to look at the next room, to the thin line of light along the floor, before clicking on the light to the room he was entering.

It was a simple square room with one light in the ceiling, a twin sized metal bed screwed to the floor along one wall, the wall opposite was lined with locking cabinets and a sink, and a toilet sat between the cabinets and bed on the farthest wall from the door. He unlocked one of the cabinets, pulling out a set of clean sheets and a thin, hospital grade blanket. He made the bed, the plastic of the protective covering on the mattress and pillow crinkling as he carefully tucked in sheets and placed the pillow in its case. He locked the cabinet again, then unlocked another, pulling out two gowns; one for Will now, one for him once his fever calms. Another cabinet and a set of towels and a washcloth were pulled out and placed on the countertop within a portable basin that was set next to the sink.

Next, Hannibal moved from the room Will would call home for the foreseeable future to his medical supply room. Will was fevered and had been on a regimen of antibiotics before he checked himself out of the hospital, which meant he had stopped too soon. He plucked out an IV bag, considered the anesthesia options before settling on propofol, and he considered a cephalosporin for Will’s fever. He could dose him low enough to break his fever but not treat

the encephalitis; Hannibal wanted to have the option to keep Will hallucinating. After considering his planned timeline, he opted to allow Will's sickness to linger untreated. He set up an IV stand and tray of supplies--alcohol swabs, needles, gauze pads, tape, a catheter--and rolled them back to Will's room, leaving them near the head of the bed.

All that was left was to collect Will.

Hannibal made his way back through his basement, up his stairs, through his pantry and kitchen, to his study, where he had left Will. The couch was empty, but the room still hung heavy with the scent of Will. He quietly made his way around the couch, towards the desk, where he could hear hard breaths.

"Will," Hannibal spoke before rounding the desk, so as not to scare the man with a sudden appearance. Will was sitting on the floor beside the chair, his back to the wood of the desk drawers, his head hung down between his knees. Hannibal kneeled down next to him, reaching over to lift his chin. Will's eyes were wide but he could tell they were unseeing. This would make moving Will easier, at least. "You are doing very well, Will. We have a very short distance to go until we are with Abigail again. Come now."

"I *know* who *I am,*" Will muttered as his head rolled back and thudded against the wood of the desk.

"Yes, Will. Now come," Hannibal said as he took hold of Will's arm, pulling him up with him as he rose. Will allowed himself to be pulled to his feet and Hannibal securely placed one hand on the small of his back, grasping his arm with his other hand to steady him. He walked Will through the house to the pantry, where he decided the easiest way to get the dazed man downstairs would be to carry him. It was better than risking a fall resulting in an injury. Hannibal guided Will to hold on around his shoulder, then lifted him in a bridal carry. Sidestepping to allow for Will's height while held in his arms, Hannibal made his way down into the basement.

Once down, he continued to carry Will until they reached his room. Hannibal set him down on the bed, brushed damp curls from his forehead, and watched as blue eyes rolled up until only the whites were visible. It was a good sign that Will would not remember the journey or the basement, or how to access the basement.

"Will," Hannibal spoke softly, "I am going to undress you now. You are in dirty clothing and you are sick. We need to get you clean and into a hospital gown. Will you cooperate?"

He waited for a response. Nothing. Just steady, slow breaths through lightly parted lips and dark lashes resting on fever flushed cheeks. Hannibal watched him, wondering what could be happening behind those closed eyelids, what fevered dreams would manifest, then he got to work stripping Will of his boots, prison jumpsuit, socks, and underwear. He guided Will onto his back, laying on the bed, then stepped away. As he moved across the room, he could hear the rhythm of Will's breathing change, the sharp scent of fear overtaking the rest. Hannibal turned to watch him, using muscle memory to retrieve a water basin and begin filling it with warm water. If Will were so acutely aware of his location while under the effects of a sedative, his fever, and encephalitis, that would explain why he had moved himself earlier. Had he been running?

Hannibal turned the water off and returned to Will, towels draped over his arm and basin in his hands. He placed the water down and kneeled, carefully reaching out to gently place his hand on the other's chest, above his heart. Will's breath hitched, then calmed.

So he hadn't been running. He had been searching.

"Will, I am going to bathe you now," Hannibal spoke softly. He flattened his hand to better feel the other's heart rate, knowing he could feel it better at a pulse point but wanting to feel the muscle itself. Will's heart slowed with his voice, with the pressure placed on him. Hannibal couldn't help the twitch of his lips, a smile slipping through. Will had been searching for him and Will was calmer in his presence. The foundations he had been laying of codependency were working.

As he worked to clean Will, he spoke to him. Each pass of the warm, wet cloth over sweat salted skin, Hannibal informed him of what he was doing. He guided him to each side, cleaning his back, his buttocks, his thighs, each touch gentle and with extra warning for the vulnerability. Once he finished, he made sure to dry whatever had not air dried before dressing Will into one of the hospital gowns and laying him down on his back.

"I am going to leave you now, Will, but only for a moment. I am only moving across the room to clean up," Hannibal announced as he stood. He watched for a change in breathing, in scent, in heart rate but found none. Good. He made quick work of cleaning up, then folding the wet towels to take with him once he was ready to leave. Once done he returned and eased himself back down next to the bed. He touched Will's arm, running fingertips down until they met the crook of his elbow, pressing down as he watched the man's face for any sign of awareness. "I am going to start you on an IV now, Will. Please make sure to hold still for me."

After he received no reaction beyond eyes moving under closed lids, Hannibal set to work, continuing to narrate his actions. With practiced hands, he made quick work of setting up the IV bag with the sedative, inserting the needle and taping it down, then setting the drip to ensure Will would remain hydrated, and most importantly, unconscious. His next step was catheterization, as he did not want to spend useless time coming down to clean Will and his bedding. A brief moment of apprehension bubbled up and Hannibal sat back to study the other, face lax now that propofol was coursing through his veins; he had assumed if their relationship evolved into the physical realm, he would be able to undress Will and explore his body as a lover, consensually, and endear Will further to him. The feeling passed and the former surgeon performed the catheterization with the same clinical distance he'd done many times before, silent in his since there was no need to reassure Will. There was no chance he was aware of any of his what was happening now.

Hannibal stood and tucked the blanket up over Will, leaving his arms exposed. He gathered the trash from setting up the IV and catheter, the wet towels, and made his way out of the room, looking back briefly. "I have to leave you now, Will. You will be safe here."

With those last words, he locked his dear Will in the room. His next steps towards clearing the empath's name were to be completed, and soon.

BLOOMINGTON, MINNESOTA; FRIDAY 9:04PM

“There’s nothing new here,” Jack barked through the phone as he spoke to the usual BAU forensics team--Katz, Zeller, and Price. “It seems like Will had Abigail at the house but never made it to the cabin.”

“There’s nothing else at his house either,” Bev said once she realized Jack was waiting for input. “We’ve gone over everything and there’s nothing new. Nothing that points to any other places Will would take Abigail.”

“Well, nothing new besides the dog hair tumbleweeds,” Zeller’s voice cut in.

“Do you think he fed her to the dogs?” Price’s voice mused next.

“Should we collect stool samples?” Zeller spoke again.

Bev’s voice cut in before Price could begin arguing with Zeller. “No. Will loves his dogs. He would never--”

“Collect them,” Jack commanded, cutting her off. “Who has his dogs?”

“Alana,” Bev replied. “She took them out of the shelter, said they’re having a hard enough time with Will being gone.”

“I’ll tell Dr. Bloom to collect them,” Jack said. “None of you have heard from him? No phone calls, texts?”

A chorus of denial rang out. Jack sighed and closed his eyes, rubbing the bridge of his nose. “Okay. Okay. I’ll be back tomorrow. Go over the files again. There has to be something.”

He hung up before he could hear any arguments or excuses. The urge to throw his phone across the room overcame him, but instead he gripped it tighter, his knuckles paling. There had been nothing in the field where they found Cassie Boyle, nothing in the cabin, nothing where they had recovered Nick Boyle’s body. Initial forensics only determined that there was blood across the floor of the kitchen in the Hobbs home. Samples were on their way back to the lab for DNA comparison, but Jack knew who it belonged to already. He was angry. Angry at himself, for once again putting another agent on the line, for losing them. Jack hadn’t realized how lost Will Graham had become when he had still been standing there in front of him.

Another phone call, if for no other reason than to calm his mind. Jack went through his contacts until he found Alana Bloom, therapist, confidant. A woman Will once described as romantically interesting. It rang twice before he heard her greeting, her voice a mix of panic and expectation.

“Dr. Bloom,” he used her name in lieu of a hello. “I need you to collect samples, from the dogs.”

“Samples?” She shot back. Jack sighed; she wasn’t yet convinced of Will’s capabilities.

“Yes. Stool samples. Bring them to the BAU lab for Zeller,” he said, keeping his voice measured, assuring, emotionless.

“Jack, if you’re implying Will has fed parts of … parts of Abigail to his dogs…” Alana paused, taking in a deep, shaky breath. “This is impossible, Jack.”

“I know,” the agent said, firmly. He closed his eyes, softening his tone. “I know. Just, please. If for no other reason, it will help rule some things out.”

There was a long silence between them. Jack was waiting for her to agree and he knew she was waiting for him to give her some new information, some good news that he didn’t have.

Finally, he heard a quiet yes breathed into the phone. He thanked her, then took the phone away to hang up. She hadn’t hung up yet either. Jack brought the phone back to his ear.

“Alana?”

“Yes?”

“You don’t think Will would have gone off to hurt himself, do you?” It was a question that had been trying to break into the front of his mind since the man’s escape from his medical transport. Jack hadn’t wanted to ask, he didn’t want to give the words life, but he had to know. He needed to know if searching was pointless.

“Jack,” she almost sounded like she laughed, but it came out more of a surprised sob. “If I knew what he was capable of, I could tell you… Just, find him.”

“Yeah,” he agreed. He heard the phone line disconnect, then pocketed his cell. Jack let out a breath he hadn’t realized he was holding, then climbed into the rental. He had red eye flight to catch.

donum

FREDERICKSBURG, VIRGINIA; MONDAY, 8:26AM

The call had come in early in the morning. A retiree who had been illegally metal detecting in an old Civil War battlefield in the piedmont of Virginia had called the local police, who had called the state police, who had then called the FBI. He stood there now, two hours after his first phone call, across the yellow tape line, metal detector in hand and untouched by the police. He had been told to wait for questioning, but not a single soul paid him any mind. Instead, group after group of men and women in clearly marked FBI jackets passed him, grim looks on their faces as they made their way up the walking trail into the woods.

A stone faced, large man passed, dressed in a long, gray wool coat and a black hat. Another gentleman, ashen hair and a curious look on his face, dressed far too nicely followed close behind. They seemed to be the last to walk by and the retiree called out to them. The man in the hat held a hand up to him and lifted a radio to his mouth, speaking in it briefly before they passed on their trek to the crime scene.

“A witness?” The curious man asked.

“No, Dr. Lecter. He found it,” the other man said, and they headed to the tree line.

They walked in silence together, only interrupted by the sound of footsteps and the crackle of Jack’s radio. Hannibal was waiting him out to see what he would say, if he would try to warn him for what he was about to see or if he would throw him into a Ripper crime scene in the same manner he often throws ill, empathetic Will. It wasn’t until clear, bright yellow lettering appeared on the backs of busy workers that Jack stopped and turned to face him. Hannibal stared at him, studying him, noting the deep bags under his eyes; he must not have slept on his flight home.

“I have not seen it yet, but there’s … there’s a chance this was Will’s doing from what the officer I spoke to described,” Jack warned.

Hannibal shifted his expression to concern and gave the man a nod to indicate he was prepared. “If this scene allows us insight into his mind, perhaps then it could lead us to him.”

“Let’s hope,” the agent mumbled before they continued on to the clearing. “Just tell me what you see, if you’re able to.”

If anyone were to stop what they were doing and ask Hannibal for his honest opinion, he would tell them what they were viewing was a thing of beauty. Above them, strung up by fishing line and skewered upon a large set of antlers, hung the body of a young woman they would soon learn to be that of Abigail Hobbs. The Ripper had spent his time detailing each crime falsely attributed to Will Graham, from carving her face from ear to missing ear to degloving her forearm, to driving a hunting knife into her abdomen and slicing her open as she had done to Nick Boyle. Antlers pierced her chest and stomach, her feet tied together and arms held back as if she were laying on the rack in a field rather than hung in the trees. Each

place on her body that fishing line caught was annointed with a fly, each woven meticulously with bits of flesh, bone, teeth, and hair from the copycat victims. The only new addition to dear Abigail was a crown of willow, woven into a delicate halo and placed upon her head, the right side of the halo adorned with red sweet Williams that trailed from the halo to her hair.

His only regret for this piece is that Will would not be able to see it in any form but photographs from an evidence file, composition unconsidered.

He and Jack split away from one another, circling the tableau before them. Hannibal watched as yellow numbered cards were set down on the ground, as the man known as Zeller snapped pictures, as Bev gave him a sad, strained smile and went back to swabbing the ground beneath the display. Hannibal waited until he had made his way to the side, where he could look up and see the split profile of Abigail, where it would be reasonable for him to recognize her, before he called out.

“This is Abigail Hobbs,” he willed his voice to crack on her last name and he stepped back to watch chaos erupt among the agents before him.

Jack was by his side quickly, rudely grasping his arm to take him away from the scene. More cameras clicked behind him, voices telling agents to start canvassing the area for any sign of Will Graham, any other trails not often walked that they may have missed in their preliminary search of the area. The two stopped at the edge of the clearing. Bev had followed them and she crowded up to them, keeping her voice quiet.

“Is Will capable of this?” She asked, looking from Jack to Hannibal. “I mean, he’s sick. *Sick* sick. Shouldn’t have left the hospital when he did sick.”

“It has to be him,” Jack stated, his voice low as he stared across the clearing at Abigail’s body. “He took her out of the hospital. He took her to Minnesota. No one else has seen her since.”

“But this is… It’s so intricate,” Bev sighed, then slipped back into work mode to continue. “It has a piece of each copycat murder put into it. She’s even posed just like Cassie Boyle’s body. He even tied her feet together so they are hanging exactly the same despite being hung up instead of laid on the ground. It’s got flair, Crawford. It’s--”

“It’s theatre,” Hannibal interrupted. He did not want to outright state what he believed to be obvious and he knew Will often described his art as theatres to those in his work circle. His interruption earned him a pained look from Beverly and a hard, calculating stare from Jack. Hannibal stood his ground, face neutral, calmly waiting for them to come to the correct conclusion.

“Finish your preliminary work and get her back to the lab,” Jack ordered, still staring at Hannibal but directing his words to Bev. She nodded and turned, heading back without another word. Once alone, Jack lowered his voice before speaking again. “Why would the Ripper have Abigail, Dr. Lecter? How? And what would he gain from injecting himself into copycat killings?”

Hannibal mulled over the man's questions for a moment, turning again to stare at his art. They would not know the full extent of the effort he put into it until they had it back at the lab, picking it apart piece by piece to try and understand the layers of meaning. They would come to the conclusion one by one, quiet at first, until one of them broke and said it out loud to the others. The guilt of believing their very own Will Graham had been the one committing these crimes would delay their realization, but once they came to it, they would set to work proving his innocence.

"Will expressed that he believes he is being framed," Hannibal finally said, a lightness in his voice. He would not continue the thought, but rather allow it to ruminate within the man's own mind. "Perhaps I should leave. Abigail was just as personal to me as she was to Will."

"Of course," Jack's demeanor shifted, from hard to compassionate. "I'll call you if we find him, Dr. Lecter."

"Please do, Jack." Hannibal allowed his eyes to lay on the vision that Abigail had become, before turning and making his way back down the path. She was out of his hands now, out of Will's, and in theirs to do with what they must.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; MONDAY 15:39

"Every detail is here," Price declared, moving from a table covered in lures set in individual trays, passing a table littered with antlers, to a table where the willow crown and flowers were laid out. "And then some."

"There are pieces of hair, there's teeth, bone, even burnt plastic in the lures," Bev added.

"What does it mean?" Jack asked from his position in the corner of the room, his arms crossed over his chest.

Zeller ripped back a curtain that had been separating him from the rest of the room, where he had been working on a preliminary autopsy of Abigail now that they had removed her from the antlers. "She had organs removed, which we expected. But here's the catch: some were removed postmortem while others were removed premortem, both expertly done. And her ear? Whoever removed it had surgical knowledge, because it was removed long enough before death that grafted skin had begun healing over the injury. No sign of infection either."

"He means whoever killed her butchered her before and after death," Price clarified for Jack.

"We have lures, which were never used in a murder. We just *found* lures in Will's home. We have antlers, per Cassie Boyle and Marissa Schurr. She was gutted, just like Nick Boyle was. Her face is split, per Donald Sutcliffe. We have burnt plastic, per Georgia Madchen."

"And her arm was degloved," Zeller interjected.

"Degloved? Skinned?" Jack asked.

“Just degloved. He ripped the skin off her arm, tearing it from the muscle without any grace,” Zeller said, earning a grossed out look from Price.

“But that was an injury she sustained prior to her death,” Jack argued. “Why would he include that?”

“It’s so we’d see it,” Bev said. She crossed her arms over her chest in a mimic of Jack, leaning her hip against one of the tables. “He wanted us to see Madchen at the crime scene. We couldn’t see the tiny bits of burnt plastic in the lures, not until we got back here. It’s like Hannibal said. This was theatre.”

“So, Will is giving us every piece of the murder and then some. To what end? To tell us what he’s planning to do next? To tell us who he thinks is framing him?” Jack barked out. The three techs looked around at one another, daring someone to speak first. Impatient, Jack threw his arms out in a gesture to get someone to talk.

“Sir,” Price spoke up. “It’s not Will. He’s not a surgeon.”

Jack stared at Price, then made his way across the room towards the door. “Get me a report on whose hair and bones are in the lures. Check all the organs she has left to see if they match any other victims. Now.”

He threw open the door and left, heading down the hall towards his office. All Jack wanted to do was sit in his chair and receive some good news for once. Instead, he saw the familiar dark hair and prim stature of Alana Bloom waiting for him. A deep breath to gather himself later, he pulled open his office door and strolled in, seating himself in his chair.

“I take it you’ve heard,” Jack said.

Alana furrowed her brow and turned her head as she seated herself across from him. Jack could see the gears shifting in her mind as she decided what she was going to ask; it meant no one had informed her about what had happened to Abigail yet. He closed his eyes, wishing he had a place to disappear to.

“What haven’t I heard yet, Jack?” She finally asked, her voice taking on the measured tone of a practiced psychiatrist.

“Alana,” Jack opened his eyes to look at her. “We’ve found Abigail.”

The instant relief on her face pained him, so he held a hand up before she could get her hopes up. With that, she hardened her face, sitting up closer.

“Jack. Is Abigail okay?” Her voice was no longer measured.

“No,” Jack sighed. “No, Alana. We … we don’t think Will was involved.”

She leaned back in her chair, raising a hand to cover her mouth as tears welled in her eyes. Alana gasped for breath, trying to calm herself. Her head shook a weak ‘no’ a few times before she finally slumped, tears finally winning and rolling down her cheek.

“Where is Will?” She asked quietly. If Will wasn’t involved in Abigail’s death, he could be right. He could be a victim being framed, a piece in a game.

“We still haven’t found him,” Jack answered grimly. “We have our best agents searching for him.”

“Did you have your best agents searching for Abigail?” Alana bit back. She stood, pacing the office, hugging her arms around herself.

“That’s fair,” Jack conceded. He watched her pace, feeling much the same.

“The safest place Will could have been was in custody, Jack,” Alana huffed out. “If it’s not him, if he was right… Who could be doing this?”

“My current theory is that the Chesapeake Ripper is taunting us,” he admitted, leaning back in his chair and, unable to hold back his exhaustion and how done he felt, he rubbed his face with his hands and growled. Jack couldn’t *not* see it. The moment Hannibal called the display theatre, the pieces began falling into place, each murder over the last few weeks a puzzle piece slotting together. The Ripper was taunting him; he had sent Miriam Lass after him and she had gotten close enough that whoever it was took her. Now Jack was using another agent, another gifted person who he knew could get close too, and the Ripper wanted to show him that he couldn’t. That no matter who he used, he wouldn’t get close because the Ripper was always one step ahead.

Or several steps.

They had been treating finding Miriam’s arm as the Ripper bragging that he hadn’t been caught, that Abel Gideon had been lying or delusional. But what if it hadn’t been that at all? What if it had been a warning?

“Jack,” Alana’s voice cut through his spiraling thoughts. “You have to find Will.”

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY 20:00

The lilting piano chords of Chopin filled the air, accompanying the sound of sizzling meat in a pan. Hannibal tilted the pan to pour a drizzle of white wine, swirling it around the edges before settling the pan back down flat and turned the heat to low. A pat of anchovy-butter paste was added and the man turned away to give it time to dissolve and for the alcohol to cook off as he set his tray. A simple salad dressed with oil, a wine glass, and a book sat offset to allow space for his primary dish once it was complete.

He moved across the kitchen to his pantry, where he moved his butcherblock counter out of the way to give him access to his basement. The hatch was opened, and he then moved away to select this evening’s wine, before returning to the kitchen to plate his dinner. The wine was uncorked but not poured. Once done, he made sure the balance of his tray between the dishes and wine bottle was right, before making his way downstairs. He had left the lights on in

preparation for his evening, and all he had to do was make his way to Will's room, where he had already placed a chair next to the man's bed.

Hannibal unlatched the door and stepped inside, taking in the sight before him. Will lay there, still as ever, his breathing slow and steady but his curls wet and stuck to his pale, sweat shined face. He was just as beautiful as the day Hannibal first laid eyes upon him.

"Good evening, Will," he said, moving into the room and settling himself in his chair. His tray was propped up on his lap and he began pouring himself a glass of his wine. "Tonight's dinner is *rognoncini trifolati* with a simple salad paired with a Chateau Latour. Or, if you were awake to say, you would call it sauteed kidneys and red wine."

The first bite was exquisite. Hannibal hummed quietly to himself, closing his eyes so he could appreciate the taste without sight impeding his senses. The sound of cutlery on china filled the room as Hannibal fed himself, sitting in a comfortable silence with his companion. They had not shared many meals together, but this was the first of many more to come. He finished his meal, then stood and placed his tray on the counter, before plucking up his book and returning to his chair.

"We don't have much to talk about right now, so I thought I'd bring a book. It is not in your native tongue, but rather a French book by the title *Candide*," Hannibal mused as he opened it to the marked page where he had left off. "Perhaps you will understand some words, since you spent your childhood in Louisiana."

Hannibal began to read to Will, having planned to read to him for around an hour. He had no desire for Will's mind to slip any farther away than it may have with his encephalitis and the stresses put on him by ever-demanding Jack. Afterwards, he would ensure Will was doing well and didn't need any bathing or adjustments to his medications or catheter. He would then retire to his own bed to rest for the next day.

signum

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 07:00

Will Graham had been a man balancing on the edge between self-destruction and succumbing to his own dark desires since the day the Federal Bureau of Investigation decided he was worth using, despite his overwhelmingly apparent mental instability. We know from my previous article, Copycat or Practice?*, what Graham's choice was. Until this morning, the only proof we had was his own behavior. The rest was speculation.*

Be forewarned: The images you are about to see are gruesome. They tell a tale of a sick man hellbent on living out each of his sinister fantasies over, and over, and over.

Freddie Lounds had been busy.

Hannibal was seated at his office desk, his tablet set up in front of him with Tattlecrime's newest article pulled up. The title was a crass *FBI's Favorite Escapes, Murders Hobbs Girl*. Crass, but to the point. He scrolled on to the photographs, to confirm whether she had been there prior or after the call from Jack had come in. He had half expected to see her sequestered behind the police tape rather than the elderly gentleman when he arrived on the scene with Jack.

The stark lack of FBI jackets and lower light confirmed she had received his anonymous tip. Each photograph was from afar; the first the trail leading to the scene, the next was Abigail's body hung in the air, viewed from a safe distance but fully showing the beautiful details of his work.

Hannibal read on; he hoped for great things from her to help drive the paranoia of the BAU team.

Yes, reader, you are correct in your horror: That is Abigail Hobbs, victim not only to her own father's sick cannibalistic fantasies, but now to Graham's very own homicidal desires. She was a girl failed by all those around her to the point the FBI thought giving her father's killer access to her during her recovery was a sound decision.

This is where their ill-thought out safety measures got her. Strung up in a tree, sacrificed to dark desires.

Another image. It was a closeup from just in front of her, showing her bound ankles and the antlers pierced through her torso, the wound along her abdomen. It was not a very artful piece and Hannibal was glad to see Lounds had enough sense in her head to censor between Abigail's legs. The next image she placed behind a blur filter that needed to be clicked to view. Hannibal clicked and he was rewarded with a high-definition photograph of Abigail's face from the side, the healing skin graft where her ear should have been fully visible, her head hung back farther than would have naturally been allowed by skin if it had been intact rather than sliced by a deep Glasgow smile. He left the image unblurred as he continued reading on.

Each element of Graham's other murders are present. He mounted her on antlers, which is something Garrett Jacob Hobbs was never confirmed to have done by Tattlecrime investigators. It is an invention of Graham's own. If I were to make an educated guess based on the wounds to her abdomen, I'd say some of her organs were missing. We know he ate one of her ears already, either unable to resist his own urges or unable to separate his own from Hobbs', and he had already taken organs from other victims. He wasn't just satisfied with connecting the Hobbs murders to her, so he cut her face from ear to ear. Graham got a taste of disfigurement when he was hunting Georgia Madchen and the chance to once again showcase his twisted brutality was too much to pass up.

The one thing that doesn't make sense to me about this display is its intricacy. Is Will Graham capable of this? Mentally, yes. Physically? The man is allegedly ill.

I have two theories. The first is that Will Graham is a patsy. He is someone another killer has identified as an easy target to manipulate and that killer has been spending their time grooming Graham into the perfect fall guy. Now that Graham has escaped--and is still at large--the killer has to cover his own tracks. But my more realistic, second theory is that Graham is so infatuated with serial murderers that he had to escalate his behavior. In other words, he has decided to honor this region's most prolific killer: The Chesapeake Ripper. Too many years getting into killers' minds has left anything less than the best unsatisfying for a man such as Will Graham.

Below are more images of the most recent crime as well as links to previous articles regarding Graham and his known work. The comments section is open so feel free to share any of your own theories with us.

Hannibal stared at the paragraph containing her theories, wondering if someone had told Lounds that Will has been claiming that he's being framed. From what he knew, Will had only expressed those concerns to Jack, Alana, and himself.

Could it have been so obvious?

No. Freddie Lounds was simply stirring the pot as she was wont to do. Otherwise, she would be aware that Will was never intended to be a 'patsy,' but rather to be a man wound up like a spinning top and left to his own devices once he was set free. Hannibal closed his tablet and set it aside before pulling his sketch book out from a locked desk drawer. Her tabloid style writing had planted a seed and he decided to explore the idea.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; TUESDAY, 12:05

"Why would the Ripper get involved in the copycat murders though?" Bev asked through a mouthful of noodles, pointing her chopsticks at the other two. "Think he's just fucking with us? 'Ha ha you can't figure it out and are blaming the first guy who looks suspicious' kind of a thing?"

"I still think it's Will," Zeller admitted, stabbing a potsticker with one chopstick.

“You’re just sour he said you would make a bad politician,” Price said as he reached across the desk and properly picked up a potsticker with his own set, making eye contact as he popped it into his mouth. He snapped the end of his sticks together and Zeller rolled his eyes.

“He only said that because he knows it’s not true,” Zeller shrugged. “Wasn’t telling the truth about who he is, wasn’t telling the truth about me.”

They quieted down as another tech came in carrying a folder. She stopped and awkwardly looked around at the three eating their lunches, then held the file up. “I didn’t think this should wait. One of the samples of hair from the lures matches Graham.”

Almost in unison, they abandoned their lunch and crowded the tech, one of them grabbing the folder from her. They made it to the closest desk and Price grabbed the food, moving it while Zeller and Bev began going through the findings, whose DNA was found on each of the lures. It wasn’t until Price returned and picked up a pile that the tech cleared her throat to get their attention again.

“The same lure that had Graham’s hair contained a sliver a bone that matches Miriam Lass’ DNA,” she said as she backed her way towards the door. “I didn’t want to be the one to tell Director Crawford. I didn’t even want to be the one to bring this to you but I drew the short straw. Good luck.”

“Not it,” Price said as soon as the tech left.

Bev snatched the papers from their hands and found the right document. The other two stared over her shoulders and they read it together; Lure 09 had red thread that matched thread found in Will’s home previously, feather fragments from a Northern Cardinal, twelve strands of Will’s hair, and a quarter inch sliver of bone that belonged to Miriam Lass.

“Also not it,” Zeller said once he reached the end of the report. He walked over to his desk and picked up his food, throwing it right into the garbage can before throwing himself down in his chair. “I guess this means Will’s innocent.”

“Innocent and in a great deal of danger,” Price added, then turned to Bev. “Do you want us to go with you?”

“No. No sense in Crawford yelling all of us,” she said with a sigh. She slid out the two papers of the report on Lure 09 and handed the rest to Price. “Go through the rest. Maybe google what cardinals symbolize.”

Bev made her way down the hall to Jack’s office, knocking twice but entering before she got an answer. If Jack was busy, he’d understand the interruption.

What she found was Jack sprawled in one of his armchairs, head back, snoring. She hadn’t slept much herself the last few days and she knew Jack probably hadn’t slept at all up until he crashed on his chair. Bev lowered herself into the other chair and set the report on the small table between them. He must not have been in a deep sleep because the sound of her scuffing her shoe on the floor as she slid down to a more reclined position in the chair woke him.

“I’m up, I’m up,” Jack grumbled as he came to, rubbing his eyes and sitting himself up more. He adjusted his tie and then looked over to see Bev giving him a bleak look. A sigh escaped him and he laid his head back down, focusing on the ceiling above him. “I suppose it would be inappropriate for me to ask if you have any good news.”

“Yeah. Inappropriate and wrong,” she agreed, her voice serious. Bev picked the papers back up and held them out to him, clearing her throat to get his attention. He stared at her for a moment as if asking if he really wanted to see and finally relented, taking them from her and scanning the two pages. She didn’t wait for him to come to the conclusion himself. “He has Will.”

Jack rubbed his face and tossed the papers down onto the table again. He pulled his phone out of his pocket, wondering who he could even call to help with this. Chilton was out; he had spent so much time trying to convince Gideon that he was the Ripper that Chilton would no longer be a reliable source to help with profiling. Bloom was emotional, upset that he had put Will in such a dangerous situation, and he didn’t think she’d be able to handle finding out that the Ripper had Will. Not yet. There was Lecter, but the man had been upset over Abigail. He had hidden it well, but Jack believed he knew him well enough at this point to read him. He was his best bet, and as close as he was to Will, he may have heard some insight. Something that would give them a starting point to finding where the Ripper may have Will, or even why he might want Will.

“Do you know, I was starting to think that Tattlecrime woman was right. That Will is insane, that he needed more than just thinking like killers and that meant he had to start killing himself,” Jack admitted, still staring down at his blank phone screen. “I even thought, maybe Will had help escaping. But now we’ll have to treat it like a goddamned kidnapping and it’s been days, Katz.”

“He did escape. The Ripper wouldn’t have left witnesses,” Bev reminded him. “Will was right and none of us were listening to him. He knows how evidence works. He knows how people see him. He knew if he went to trial for four murders that he would spend the rest of his life behind bars. And if Will couldn’t see what would happen to him if he escaped, we couldn’t have either.”

“You think the Ripper planned to have Will imprisoned?”

“I would,” she said with a light laugh. “If anyone was ever going to figure out who the Ripper is, it would be Will Graham.”

Jack nodded. It made sense. He picked the papers up and handed them back to Bev, who took the hint and stood to leave.

“Katz, tell everyone to send over whatever unfinished reports you have by the end of the day and then everyone go home. We won’t find him if we’re all exhausted,” Jack said. He laid his head back down and closed his eyes. He waited until he heard footsteps fade and his office door click closed before he let himself drift back off. He’d pull up everyone’s unfinished reports once he got them and call Hannibal to bounce ideas off of him. Until then, he’d nap.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 18:52

For the second time in an hour, Hannibal's cell phone rang. The first time, he had been preparing his dinner. This time, he was cleaning up. He had not dined with Will this evening due to the first call, but he had not answered it knowing it was nothing to do with anything he was interested in. Jack had not left a message. A second call was unexpected, but more welcome than an unannounced visit, so Hannibal set the dish down that he had been washing, dried his hands, and picked the call up.

"Good evening, Agent Crawford," he answered, keeping his tone between pleased to hear from him and apprehensive of what he may be calling for. After all, they had not found dear Will yet.

"Dr. Lecter," Jack's voice betrayed how exhausted the man felt. Hannibal smiled. "I'm sorry if I'm interrupting your evening, but I have a few questions."

"It is never an interruption to speak with you during such dire times. How may I help, Jack?" Hannibal allowed his curiosity to be piqued, but he did place the phone on speaker and set it down. He had dishes to wash.

"Did Will ever indicate to you that he was in contact with anyone who may be interested in finding Abigail Hobbs?" Jack wasn't asking what he wanted directly; Hannibal was being asked if Will had mentioned speaking to murderers known to him but not to Jack and his ilk. Hannibal hummed, as if considering what he could remember.

"No," Hannibal answered after drawing out the anticipation. It was not a lie. "Do you believe Will would deliver Abigail to a murderer who would finish her father's mission, if he were himself incapable?"

"No, no," Jack replied quickly.

"So either you still believe Will killed and displayed Abigail or you have new evidence that another killer is involved," Hannibal concluded. He knew the truth, but Hannibal was interested in what conclusion the FBI was coming to.

There was a long silence on the line. Hannibal finished washing the last dish, turned the water off, and began drying. He waited. Finally, Jack took in a deep breath.

"I didn't want to tell you yet. A girl you helped to save was just found murdered and your friend is missing," Jack was usually forthright in his discussions but he was being tactful. It was a new side of the man Hannibal had not yet seen. It was also a side of himself that he did not afford Will. A small spark of rage ignited within him to realize he was being shown a kindness he did not need while Will was expected to handle only bluntness. Still, he waited with anticipation to be told what he already knew. "Dr. Lecter, we believe the Chesapeake Ripper has Will."

Good man. It had taken them a day and a half from discovering Abigail to openly admitting what they knew to be true. Hannibal resumed drying his dishes, careful to be quiet each time he set a dish down. Jack would expect questions or accusations. Hannibal chose to goad.

“A killer such as the Ripper does not act without reason; he taunted you with the arm of a missing agent when you mistakenly believed to have caught him. Is this an escalation, Jack?”

“An escalation,” Jack muttered and Hannibal could hear him shifting, could hear him throwing something down on a surface, most likely his desk. He was still at his office. “What would he be escalating, Dr. Lecter? And why?”

Hannibal smiled. He finished drying his dishes then began moving about his kitchen, placing each glass, each plate back in their proper place. “He took an agent you sent after him and kept her alive until he needed her to send a message. You thought he played his hand. Instead he has now taken another agent from you, an agent you had in custody. What did he leave for you?”

“Only hair,” Jack said. He was quiet again. The sounds of papers shifting came through the phoneline.

“Is there a chance my friend is alive, Jack?” Hannibal asked after the silence dragged on. Jack still wanted information from him, perhaps help in profiling the Ripper, or even figuring out where Will would have run off to, but Hannibal was not interested in allowing that to happen. Instead, he planted seeds to start Jack spiraling, to become desperate. Desperate men make mistakes.

“I’m not giving up on Will,” he replied firmly. “I will let you know when we have more information. Have a good evening, Dr. Lecter.”

“Thank you, Jack,” Hannibal said in place of a farewell. He hung his phone up and left it on his counter. Moving about the kitchen, he finished the last of his cleaning before hanging his apron back up. He left his shirt sleeves rolled up, his vest and jacket draped over a chair by his island, then made his way into his pantry. Jack may have caused him to adjust his early evening plans, but he would still have time with Will tonight. He had already prepped the basement.

Hannibal made his way down, making a brief detour to his medical supply room for a gurney. He rolled it to Will’s room, unlatched the door, and rolled it inside.

“Good evening, Will. We have a busy night ahead of us. I have had inspiration for what to do with you,” he narrated as he locked wheels and made his way over to Will. He bent down, putting an arm under Will’s shoulders and another under his knees, then lifted him to transfer him to the gurney. He pulled the IV stand over, unlocked the wheels, and rolled Will out of his room. “You will look splendid, but it won’t be for a few days yet. I have to take something from you, dear Will, and I want to keep you for a few days to make sure your body begins recovering.”

He pushed Will through sheets of plastic hanging from the ceiling, into an area Hannibal kept as sterile as possible. Before dinner, he had come down and prepared the area. He had sterilized surfaces and laid out tools on trays where he would need them. He had set up monitors that were waiting to be attached to Will. He had laid out new gowns and medications that may or may not be necessary, depending on how much the sick man’s body could handle.

Hannibal allowed himself a moment to brush damp curls from Will's fevered face, petting him as he watched eye movement behind closed lids. Hannibal knew Will would most likely wake in a few days feeling as if no time had passed at all, but he couldn't help but wonder what his brain would provide for him during his moments of waking. Either way, he had a schedule to keep. Hannibal peeled Will's sweat dampened gown from his body, then once again lifted him to transfer him to a metal autopsy table.

"I am going to scrub down now, Will. I will return, and I will be quick and thorough," Hannibal said, but before turning to walk off, he leaned down to lay a soft kiss on the other's forehead. "I promise to also be gentle."

ostendo

PATAPSCO VALLEY STATE PARK, MARYLAND; FRIDAY, 04:26

The call to Jack's phone had come in at a quarter past three in the morning. Standing here now, he couldn't remember if he'd brushed his teeth, how fast he had sped to get there. He realized too late that his shoes didn't match. He didn't care. No one else would notice. He watched with tired, hard eyes as lights were erected around the crime scene, each one revealing more and more detail, each illuminating the gaunt faces of agents working to secure the area.

If he hadn't been in such a rush to get there, he would have considered calling in a forensics unit from another department.

"Do we have a positive ID?" It was Zeller's voice, distant and cold. He was compartmentalizing.

"It's him," Jack said, his gaze never shifting from the man strung up to a tree as if he were simply standing near a creek. It had been eight days since he last laid his eyes on Will Graham. "No ID on the second body yet. Are the others here?"

"They sent me to confirm first. Jimmy's being dramatic. Bev's… Bev is ready," Zeller said before walking away. It wasn't long until the team returned together, Jack finally looking down to watch as number placards were placed, pictures taken, swabs sealed into evidence bags and labeled. As expected, they worked on Will's side first. They would want to take him down before working on the other body. It would be easier on everyone once he was in the shroud of a body bag.

Jack leaned against the hood of a forensics van, shoving his hands into his coat pocket. He honestly hadn't expected to get Will back so soon; he had figured it would be another waiting game. Instead, there he stood, looking at Will Graham strung up in a pose one would describe as demure, his head hung, one hand to his chest, the other out at his side reaching towards the other posed corpse, palm up. He was wrapped in white cloth as if wearing a robe, not a speck of blood visible from where Jack stood. As with Abigail, his head was adorned with a halo of branches, but with red, pink, and white flowers. Jack assumed they were the same; willow and sweet Williams. The man looked peaceful, as if he were simply standing there, contemplating his thoughts, a stark contrast to the man displayed across the small creek from Will.

Across from him stood a nude man with one hand also to his chest, but his chest cavity was torn open and breastbone removed. Blood once poured from the opening down the length of his form where it now pooled at his feet. It was hard to see from where Jack stood, but his chest cavity looked empty, save for broken ribs poking from the red, angry meat around the edges. His other hand reached out towards Will, each finger flayed back to the bone, and the bones wrapped around a heart. His face had been removed, skin peeled back to reveal muscle, and his eyes had been gouged out.

It was much simpler than many of the tableaus Jack had seen before, but the artistry was there; it was composed as if it were a painting, where viewing it made your eyes wander from subject to subject as you took in each small detail.

“He’s breathing!” Bev screamed from her position nearest to Will. Her bag fell from her shoulder, swabs and evidence bags spilling across the ground. She held her gloved fingers to his neck, desperate to find a pulse. “Get the ambulance! Now!”

There was a rush then. Jack and EMTs towards the scene, the rest away. Bev busied herself by rushing to remove the cloth wrapped around Will, wanting to preserve what she could of the fabric before more hands touched it, before he was moved. Zeller stood, holding evidence bags open for Bev as she shoved what she could in each one, handing them off to Price to label as they worked quickly. Jack helped hold Will’s body up as he was cut down, the arm tied to his chest freed only to reveal a needle still in his arm, tubing from the needle leading to an IV bag that was secured behind Will against the tree, hidden from view.

“He meant to keep him alive,” Bev said as she pulled the halo from his head to place into an evidence bag. She finally stepped back to let the EMTs take over completely.

“But why?” Jack asked, moving away to give them room as they loaded Will’s unconscious body onto a gurney.

“Go with him. We’ve got it handled here,” Bev all but begged. If it were up to her she would be the one to go with him, but there was work to do. Jack nodded at her then followed the EMTs, climbing in the back of the ambulance once they had him in and secured. He watched through the closing doors as the BAU crew went back to working. He then turned his gaze to Will, just to watch, just to see if he could see his chest rise and fall as the sirens switched on and the ambulance set into motion.

JOHNS HOPKINS, COLUMBIA, MARYLAND; FRIDAY, 10:22

Hannibal stood at the end of the hall, watching both Jack and Alana. Jack was seated and each time he spoke his arms were held out in a non-threatening, almost defensive manner. Alana was standing, leaning forward as if she were trying to tower over the large man, holding her coat to the front of her body with both arms; she was being aggressive but it was out of fear and desperation. She was, as the colliquial term went, chewing him out. Hannibal let the scene play out, knowing Alana was blaming Jack for what happened to Will while Jack was defiantly stating he trusted Will to take care of himself. Will, who allowed himself to be used, who believed that gave him purpose, who believed he had no purpose beyond that.

He made his way down the hall then, allowing his presence to be known. Alana noticed him first, offering a sad, pained smile, before Jack turned to see who she was looking at.

“I apologize for not coming sooner, but I had a days’ worth of appointments to reschedule,” Hannibal said, foregoing any greetings. “How is Will?”

Jack stood, reaching out to shake Hannibal's hand. Hannibal obliged. "No news is good news at this point, Dr. Lecter. They are running a brain scan at the moment."

"Was his head injured?" Hannibal feigned ignorance and showed concern.

"He still has a high fever. I told them about his clock drawings," Alana spoke up. "Jack may have thought he was faking it, but I don't. He's sick."

"That was very good of you, Alana. Thank you," Hannibal said. He turned his full attention to Jack then. "Is there a theory as to why he was returned alive?"

"No," Jack admitted. "I was wondering if you could help with that."

"I have not had the honor of assisting with the Ripper's profile, Jack. I would have to defer to Alana for this," Hannibal said knowing full well she most likely had many theories, all of which put Jack in the wrong. He turned to her again, raising his eyebrows in curiosity.

Alana's lips were pressed together in a thin line, her eyes hard as she looked at Jack. The man sighed and sat himself back down, motioning for the others to sit as well. Neither of them did.

"Professionally, I am at a loss. Personally, I think he's taunting Jack for arresting Will in the first place. Maybe he's even showing us that he believes he is untouchable even if Will recovers and works on his case again," Alana said. She continued giving Jack her hard stare a moment longer before turning a softer look to Hannibal. "Thank you for coming. For being here."

"I consider Will a friend and I believe he considers me one as well. He will need the support once he wakes up," Hannibal said, then he did take Jack's offer to sit in one of the garish, uncomfortable hospital chairs. He turned to look at Jack, studying him. The man looked like he had been getting more sleep than he did when Will initially went missing; he must have had it in his mind that Will would become the new Miriam, gone and soon forgotten. The shock of the unexpected early morning phone call was apparent, with two black shoes of differing styles on the man's feet. "Will is safe now. Perhaps you should go home to rest so that when he is awake, you are prepared."

Jack frowned and did not respond yet, but he looked as if he were assessing himself, the situation. He finally rose from his chair, picking his coat up from the unoccupied one beside him. "I trust you two to play nice when he wakes up. Call me. I'll be up. I'm going to my office to go through the Ripper case files for the eightieth time this week."

With that, they said their goodbyes. Hannibal and Alana watched him until he rounded a corner, disappearing from view. Alana let out a deep breath as if he she could finally breathe, and plopped down into the chair beside Hannibal. He shifted to look at her, noting that she also must have rushed there as soon as someone called her; she had no makeup on, her hair was pulled back into a messy bun, her outfit was a basic pair of pants and plain shirt. He had never seen her not put together, not presenting an image to the world. She must care deeply for Will.

He reached out in an offer to take her hand. She looked up at him, relief washing over her face, and she took it. Hannibal squeezed gently, but firmly, to comfort her. Alana squeezed his hand back and kept her grip tight.

“They won’t disclose much information,” Alana said after a long silence. “PHI and all that. The physician on duty said he will give reports once there’s a warrant or Will wakes up to give consent.”

“Good. Will should have control of his information. It will give him a sense of power over his situation,” Hannibal said after considering his words. “I hope you told Jack not to seek a warrant.”

“Even if I told him, do you honestly think he’d listen to me?” Alana scoffed, then laid her head on Hannibal’s shoulder as if hand holding were an invitation to take what comfort she needed. He allowed it.

“No. Jack is a man on a mission. It is what makes him good at his job,” Hannibal said. They fell once again into a silence that stretched on until the sound of wheels caught Hannibal’s attention. He looked down the hall as two nurses wheeled a bed towards them that was flanked by two police officers. Hannibal caught sight of brown curls, of pale skin, the glinting of metal where Will’s hand was handcuffed to the side rail of the hospital bed. He frowned, watching them as they wheeled Will into the room across the hall from the chairs he and Alana occupied. “They have not dropped the charges?”

“Jack said it’ll be a day or two,” Alana answered. They stood. One police officer stayed standing outside the room, the other disappearing behind the door with the nurses and Will. They waited until the nurses emerged from the room until Alana approached the officer, talking to him briefly. Hannibal stood beside her, not listening, staring down the hall to where the nurses’ station sat. He wondered if he would be able to make sure they knew what medications Will had in his system so they would not give him anything that would have a poor interaction. It was much too public though; he would just have to wait and see.

A hand taking his own brought him back. Alana smiled at him. “We can go in and wait with him.”

Hannibal nodded and allowed Alana to lead him in. The cop that was in the room gave a silent acknowledgement then went back to reading a magazine. Alana settled herself in one of the chairs near the window as if she were afraid to go near the bed, but Hannibal lingered near Will. He looked at his monitors, checking his pulse, his blood pressure, his oxygen levels to make sure they were all good. He wanted to reach out and stroke his hair, but he noted that Will had yet to be cleaned. They must be waiting for someone from the FBI to come take samples of nail scrapings, of the dirt on his feet, before they bathed him. For Will’s sake, he hoped it would be before he woke up.

He wondered if Will was under sedation still or if he simply hadn’t woken up due to the propofol already in his system and the fever from his encephalitis.

The urge to pull Will’s chart from the foot of the bed hit him, but he refrained. He would look once Alana drifted off to sleep or left the room. In the meantime, he sat next to her in the

unoccupied chair. He did not offer her his hand again.

All there was to do now was to sit and wait.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

JOHNS HOPKINS, COLUMBIA, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 08:26

It was bright. Will groaned and threw an arm over his head in a vain attempt to block the light that his closed eyelids couldn't now that he was aware, awake. Not only was it intensely light, it was loud; there was a humming that he couldn't stop focusing on. Beeping. His mouth tasted stale and metallic and the urge to find water was the only thing that prompted Will to finally open his eyes, only to see a white ceiling, made brighter by strips of sunlight coming through a large window with thick, vertical blinds. He sat up, which made him realize he was hooked up to monitors, and bending his elbow was near impossible with how many needles he had taped to his arm.

So he was back in the hospital.

Will sighed. He wondered if he had made it any farther than Hannibal's office; he remembered stopping there, but by that point he was truly having trouble telling what was reality and what wasn't. They had spoken. Hannibal had been open to the idea of his innocence. He was going to take Hannibal to Minnesota and they were going to look for Abigail together, to prove he hadn't killed her. After finding her, they would work backwards from there, to prove he hadn't killed anyone. Then the stag came to him, more man than beast, and wrapped him in a blanket of skin.

A single card stood on the table next to his bed, resting between the arms and legs of a stuffed dog that sat staring at him with soulless, plastic eyes. Will almost smiled, reaching over to pick it up. The front was just watercolors bled into one another with lettering that said *Get Well Soon* in a fancy font. He flipped it open. It was Bev's scratchy handwriting, telling him she missed him and to call him as soon as he wakes up. It figures she would be the only person on his side, long after everyone else gave up on him. He laid the card back flat on the table and picked up the dog. It was soft. He'd give it to Alana to give to his dogs, if she ever went to pick them up. If she ever visited him. Maybe his dogs would smell him on the fabric, maybe they'd know he was still alive.

He held the toy to his chest. It occurred to him then that he was not cuffed to the bed. Maybe he had proven his innocence after all.

His headache was less severe, if nothing else. Will closed his eyes again, taking in a long, slow, deep breath. The buzzing sound that he had heard when he was waking up was fading into the background. He focused, listening. He could hear his own breath, his heartbeat in his ears. The beeping of monitors, the sound of air coming from the vent above him. Breathing. Someone else's breathing.

Will opened his eyes and looked fully around the room, the lights no longer as painful as they had been when he first woke up. Across from where he sat in bed, under the bright window,

sat Hannibal Lecter with his head tilted off to the side, his mouth slightly open. He was asleep. Will took in the sight of him sitting there, legs out in front of him, suit jacket neatly folded and laid across his lap. It was a different suit than the one he had been wearing when Will went to his office. At least a day had gone by then.

He swung his legs off the edge of the bed, looking away to see what monitors he'd have to roll with him if he wanted to move across the room. Abandoning the dog toy, Will stood. He was unsteady on legs that felt weaker than he remembered, his back hurt, but it wasn't enough to stop him. He grabbed hold of the monitor stand and his IV stand, rolling them with him as he slowly padded from his bedside to the chair next to Hannibal, careful not to touch him with any of the wheels. Once there, he lowered himself, hissing as a wave of pain from his lower back hit him.

The sound made Hannibal jolt awake, his eyes wide and searching as he looked first to the bed, then to Will beside him. Will did not look at him, but he offered a half-hearted smile. A silent 'thank you, but you could have just left a card.'

"Will," Hannibal said, and it amazed Will how thick his accent could sound around such a short word. Before he realized what was happening, arms were wrapped tightly around him, a hand laid on the back of his neck to guide him to rest his head on the other's shoulder. It felt like the stag enveloping him. It felt safe.

Hannibal had let his suit jacket fall to the floor.

Will pulled back then, looking up at Hannibal briefly. Checking to see what he saw. He had expected anger or pity, but what he saw was relief. He looked away before he saw anything deeper than that.

"I've never seen you with stubble before," he said, lamely. What else was there to say? He'd tried to kidnap the man and here he was, hugging him like a friend he hadn't seen in years.

From the corner of his vision, Will saw Hannibal reach up and rub his jawline then smile wide enough for sharp teeth to be visible. "I do not often allow myself to neglect grooming. These were extenuating circumstances."

His accent was still thick. Will wondered if he was doing it on purpose, or if whatever relief he was feeling overruled his carefully curated psychiatrist persona. "I'm not cuffed to the bed."

"No," Hannibal said.

"Do I often neglect grooming?" Will asked with a speech pattern mimicking Hannibal's, unable to help himself. He wasn't sure what to do. He wasn't cuffed, he wasn't in a cell, there was no police officer standing guard above his bed waiting to read him his rights before arresting him for the second time. From what he could see through the window, he wasn't in Minnesota. Bev had been to see him. She'd left him a card. She wasn't angry with him or feeling betrayed anymore.

“You often have more important tasks that keep your attention,” Hannibal answered. He rose then and held a hand out to Will. Will stared at his hand for a moment too long before he took it and allowed the other to help pull him up. Skin on his back and down his side stung again and it felt like it was being pulled. He ignored it and took hold of his IV stand. Hannibal guided the monitor back for him and he was fussed back into the bed by his doctor-turned-psychiatrist friend.

“I am almost afraid to ask,” Will adjusted himself to get comfortable, allowing Hannibal to help with his pillows and keeping IV lines and cords from the monitor out of the way. “What did I do? After I came to your office?”

Hannibal gave him a stern look, he himself picking up the stuffed dog and studying it before he answered. “I am afraid that I do not know. You came to me asking for help and I let you leave in a misguided attempt at self-preservation. And, before anyone else informs you, I did attempt to sedate you to calm you down.”

Will focused on his neck. His tie was loose, which made it easier to watch his pulse for signs of a change in heart rate. Nothing. Just a slow, steady beat as always. He frowned and looked down at his own hands to block Hannibal out of his vision. “To calm me down or stop me?”

“At the time, to stop you,” Hannibal admitted. He motioned to the bed and Will moved his leg, granting him permission to sit. His weight shifted the bed slightly and Will felt the pull on his back again. He wondered what he’d done to hurt himself.

“Why are you here?” He couldn’t help the betrayal he felt slipping through his voice. It made sense, logically, that someone would attempt to stop an escaped murderer if they had the chance. Hannibal was nothing if not someone who followed proper procedure, but it didn’t stop the sting he felt.

Hannibal held the dog toy out to him, returning it to its rightful owner. Will reluctantly took it, setting it on the bed between his legs. The other man was waiting and Will wanted to wait him out, to see how long until he’d speak. But he never won the standoff, so instead he granted Hannibal what he wanted. He looked up at him, dead in the eye.

“Will,” Hannibal did as expected; speaking once he got his eye contact. “I stayed because I wanted to be the first to speak with you. Uncle Jack will not handle this with grace and I fear Alana would become emotional despite her training and harm you in the process. What you have been through is something you will need to process with your own emotions, unimpeded by your gift of empathy. Do you understand me, Will?”

Will stared at him, looking eye to eye, looking for anything besides a blank, professional demeanor. He found nothing and it made the pang of betrayal become a stab, for a reason he would unpack later, so he took his eye contact away. He looked out the window. He wasn’t sure what to expect Hannibal to say; was Abigail found and she gave him an alibi? Was Abigail the one found guilty of murder, an apple falling too close to the tree? Had he found proof that he was being framed and shown them, convinced them so thoroughly of his innocence that they will now treat him as fragile? Tiptoe around him in fear he will quit helping them solve murders?

Hannibal was silently waiting for him again. Will nodded and muttered, “I understand.”

“Good. First, I will tell you that you are no longer charged with, nor even a suspect in, the copycat murders,” Hannibal informed him, his voice the same measured tone one would use to read off a grocery list. Relief flooded Will’s mind and he closed his eyes. He waited, hoping to hear they found who it was, why they were doing it. He was hoping it wasn’t Abigail, that she wasn’t off reliving her father’s fantasies on the nights she escaped from her own hospital bed. “Secondly, Jack’s current theory is that this entire time, it has been acts of the Chesapeake Ripper. I have no doubts he will ask you to review everything once he is aware that you are awake. There have been two tableaus since you have been missing, Will.”

“How long was I missing..?” Will asked quietly, dread rising up and overtaking his sense of relief. Two tableaus attributed to the Chesapeake Ripper that indicated he had been involved in the copycat murders? His profile made it clear he was a man who would not take responsibility for something he did not do, but why would he commit them in the first place? Was it all an elaborate game that they had stumbled into unknowingly, a game already in play between the Ripper and Hobbs? Will calmed himself; he needed more information before he began asking questions.

“Eight days. It has been three since you were found,” Hannibal answered, less measured than before. Will caught the shift, the brief regret, the fear. He turned his attention back to the man, focusing on his mouth. “Will, you were found in the second tableau.”

“No,” he heard his own voice but didn’t feel like it came out of him. Will wanted to push Hannibal, to call him a liar, to tell him to get the fuck out of the room. The beeping picked up and Will wanted to throw the monitor across the room, to make it quiet, to go back to sleep where everything had been calm, and safe, and still. He wanted the stag to come back, to take him back, to wrap him up and finally push him under until he couldn’t take in air.

“Will,” Hannibal touched his hand and Will jumped. He had been squeezing the dog toy. He dropped it.

“What?” He spit out.

“Where did you go?” Hannibal asked, calm and unruffled by Will’s anger.

“I was sick. And drugged. How the fuck am I supposed to know?” Will pulled his hand away from Hannibal’s, running both through his hair, rubbing his face, feeling the length of his beard from almost two weeks’ worth of growth. The length made what Hannibal was saying seem true, like it wasn’t some sick joke, like he wasn’t still hallucinating.

“No. Just now,” Hannibal pushed. “Tell me where you went.”

Will huffed an angry laugh. He relaxed back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling. “Am I still sick?”

“You are on the mend, Will. They found you were suffering from autoimmune encephalitis, which is swelling of the brain. Due to its autoimmune nature, it was missed during preliminary bloodwork. It explains many of the conditions you suffered from that you and I

wrongly attributed to mental illness," Hannibal explained. He paused, briefly, then added, "If Dr. Sutcliffe had been honest with us, many things could have been avoided."

"After I left your office, I was … at peace," Will said, quietly, speaking to the ceiling rather than looking at Hannibal. "I went back there."

"And where is there, Will?" Hannibal probed, curious.

"Somewhere safe," Will said, but it was more of a question. He honestly could not remember if he had ever divulged the level of hallucinations he was having, and he did not want to start admitting to them now. Not while he was in the hospital. Not when he'd just been told he was a survivor of the Chesapeake Ripper. He turned to focus on Hannibal again, watching the strip of his cheek that was illuminated by a piercing ray of sunlight through the window. "Have they found Abigail? She was alive the last time I saw her and no one had found her body yet. I … I don't remember eating her ear. I wouldn't have."

Hannibal sighed and turned away from Will this time. "I had the unfortunate opportunity to identify her body, Will. She was the first, before you. He used her to take credit where credit was due."

A sob tore through Will. He could have left her in the hospital. He should have left her. Had he been thinking clearly, maybe he would have. He just couldn't be satisfied unless he knew she was complicit in her father's murders, but even if she was, what could he have done about it? Nothing that therapy and the distance of time couldn't have fixed. Instead, he hand-delivered her to the Ripper, to her own death. And then what? He and the Ripper shared a meal together, where he was fed pieces of the girl?

The memory of vomiting up the ear caused Will to gag on another sob. Hannibal rose from the bed and went across the room for a brief moment, returning with a disposable emesis bag that he held up for Will. Hannibal stood by his side, rubbing his back and brushing curls away from his forehead, speaking quietly to him to calm him down. Will closed his eyes, once again wishing he was asleep, laid out, held and still. He listened to Hannibal speak affirming words and phrases and he forced himself to relax.

The sound of his cries must have been loud enough to alert the security detail that was posted outside Will's room. A cop popped his head in, looking at the two before shock that Will was awake registered on his face, "Should I get the nurse?"

"Yes, please," Hannibal answered for Will, who was already trying to say no. The cop disappeared and moments later, an older woman with a tight bun came rushing into the room. Hannibal allowed her to take over, stepping back to give them space. Once he felt satisfied Will wouldn't fight her, he gathered up his jacket from the floor and fished his cell phone out of the pocket. He hung the jacket on a hook near the door and turned to watch for a moment longer. The nurse had taken his place, rubbing Will's back and talking to him.

He stepped into the hall, nodding to the officer before walking a few doors down from Will's room. He dialed Jack. It barely had time to ring once before a bark of a hello came through the line.

“Good morning. Our Will has woken up,” Hannibal informed him. Before Jack could say anything else, the psychiatrist in him took over and he took on a firm tone. “Jack, he is in no condition for work talk. I would like to monitor him at least until tomorrow before you come speak with him.”

There was a silence over the line while Jack considered what to say. Eventually, he responded. “Alright. Let me know once he’s ready.”

“Of course. I will contact Dr. Bloom as well. I have no means to contact anyone else, if you’d prefer to inform them,” Hannibal said.

“I’ll tell them. Thank you, Dr. Lecter.”

“I will have him call you when he is ready. Goodbye, Jack,” Hannibal said, clicking the end call button before Jack had a chance to reply. He would let Alana know later. He walked back towards the room and knocked twice before entering. The nurse was adjusting Will’s pillows for him. Will was laying down again, eyes open but glassy.

“I gave him a sedative. He asked and it was already authorized per his chart,” she said to Hannibal, not looking over at him until she was done tending to her patient. “Whatever you said to him made him mighty upset, sir.”

“Yes. He feels emotions very strongly,” Hannibal said, standing near the doorway and watching her.

“He seems sweet. Be gentle with him when he wakes up again,” she looked him over, then made her way to leave. Hannibal stepped to the side for her, offering her a smile as he did. She smiled back carefully and slipped out of the door.

Hannibal pulled one of the chairs across the room to sit next to Will’s bed. He stared down at him a moment and Will rolled his head away, not wanting to look at him. Hannibal sat and took his phone back out, pulling up a library app. He decided he would read to Will until he either fell asleep or was ready to talk again.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank everyone for all the lovely comments you've been leaving. ☺ They mean a lot to me!

negatio

JOHNS HOPKINS, COLUMBIA, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 09:05

Will stood in the bathroom, turned awkwardly so he could look at his back. He trailed fingertips over expertly done stitches, from his back down to his side. It was a perfectly straight line, each stitch uniformly placed, the tug of skin even. It would scar but it would be clean. Smooth. A sewn incision any surgeon would be proud to call their own.

He had thought the pain on his back was from something he had done. An injury he sustained on his own. Instead, he stood alone in a cold, sterile, pink tiled hospital bathroom missing a kidney. Missing the illusion of danger, the stag who haunted him for so many weeks, who was there as a warning, unable to touch him. Unable to cut him. Unable to take anything from him but his sense of reality. Will closed his eyes, imagining the stag returning to him. More of a man, shadowed so no features showed, antlers branching off in sharp juts above its head. It had taken him to safety, wrapping him in a cloak of skin that should have panicked him, but it comforted him. They had moved through the forest, shadows merging antlers with branches, branches with hands reaching out but unable to touch. The stag would not allow it. The forest had opened up and the stag lifted him to carry him through a marsh until the water was deep enough to float; it had been warm, red as blood.

Will could almost hear the whispering that had comforted him when a knock on the door startled him out of his fantasy.

“I’m going to the bathroom,” he yelled. In actuality, he had showered then stood there staring at his surgical incision instead of shaving like he had planned. Will dressed himself in the clothes he’d talked Bev into bringing him in the middle of the night, claiming he just wanted to feel a little normal and wear something from home. He threw the door open, only to see Hannibal standing there near the bed, waiting for him. “Don’t you have a job?”

“One of the many benefits of being self-employed is creating your own schedule,” Hannibal said with an amused smile. His eyes trailed over Will, obviously noticing the lack of hospital garb, but he was polite enough not to mention it. “I brought you breakfast.”

“They have food here,” Will pointed out. He stood there awkwardly while Hannibal pulled his tray away from the bed over to one of the chairs, where he began pulling items out of an insulated cooler and plating it for him. “Did you read my medical records?”

“Yes,” Hannibal admitted as he poured a cup of coffee for the other. He motioned for the chair and Will walked over to sit. “I’ve made you a classic French omelet and *chaussons aux pommes*. Simple, easy to digest.”

“Renal diet friendly,” Will translated. “But thank you.”

Hannibal sat down in the other chair, crossing his legs and folding his hands in his lap as he watched Will, waiting for him to eat. Will made a show of picking up the fork, stabbing the

omelet, and taking a bite. It earned him a pleased smile. He ate in silence, avoiding looking at the man watching him eat.

“Why aren’t you eating? You always eat with me,” Will said finally, halfway through his food.

“I ate earlier this morning,” Hannibal stated calmly.

“You shaved,” Will pointed out through a mouthful of apple pastry.

“Yes. You have not.”

“I’m checking myself out today,” Will admitted into his coffee cup.

“That explains the cargo pants,” Hannibal said with a disappointed tone. “Do you believe you are ready? You have only been awake for one day.”

“Yep. I have a statement to give to the FBI and I miss my dogs,” Will finished his coffee then the last of his food. He sat back and looked across the room, at his lone card and dog toy. He had spoken with Jack the evening before and told him he’d come by as soon as possible to leave a statement. He wanted to get it over with.

“Will,” Hannibal’s tone was firm. “You have a history of neglecting yourself. Is this a continuation of your unhealthy behavior?”

“Will you drive me?”

“If only because I know you won’t listen to my advice,” Hannibal said. He began packing the dishes up, focusing on the task rather than Will. “Have you told Miss Jessica that you are leaving her?”

Will laughed and shook his head. “No. She has plenty of other patients to worry about.”

“Yes, but she was very protective of you after you asked for your sedative,” Hannibal said with a small smile. Will looked over at him, catching the amusement in his eyes. “She was very cross with me.”

“She’ll survive,” Will huffed, then he stood to gather his paltry belongings. “I’m going to check myself out. Where are you parked?”

Hannibal stood and buttoned his suit jacket before walking over to where his coat was hung. He returned to Will and held it out to him, and Will did nothing but stare at him. Hannibal stepped behind him and hung it on his shoulders, before going to gather his cooler. “It is cold and you’re recovering. I will follow you while you check yourself out. You have my keys.”

Will rolled his eyes and shoved his arms through the sleeves of the coat. He shoved the stuffed toy into one of the pockets and the card in another before leaving the room. Hannibal followed close behind.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; TUESDAY 13:22

There was clapping. There were strangers walking up to Will, shaking his hand. Smacking his back in masculine acts of solidarity, the perpetrators unaware of the physical pain it caused his incision. Will saw pity and fear on the faces of agents unwilling to approach him. At one point, a small group almost cornered him with questions. They would have succeeded if not for Hannibal gracefully handling their curiosities and guiding him away.

He should have known this would happen, but Will had been so focused on leaving the hospital and putting things behind him that he hadn't thought about it. Hannibal seemed like he had expected it. Will decided he would hold a private grudge against him for not at least mentioning it as a joke before they arrived.

It was better once they were farther away from the main halls, and once they were in the familiar halls of the BAU department, Will relaxed. He knew most of the people here, which meant they knew him. They knew he wouldn't want special treatment. A part of him hoped he would finish with Jack and then walk into the lab and immediately get shit from Brian, who would get told off by Jimmy, while Bev made jokes about nurses 'taking care' of him overnight. He just wanted to sit at his desk and lose himself in work.

"When you said you'd come by as soon as possible, I didn't think you meant today," Jack's voice caught him off guard. He must have heard from someone that he was there to see him. The man was waiting in the hall for him.

"You know as well as I do that the sooner a statement is given, the truer is it," Will said with a shrug. Hannibal gave him a stern look then reached out to shake Jack's hand before they headed off to his office.

"I'm surprised to see you here, Dr. Lecter," Jack said once they were in the office, as he rounded his desk to sit in his chair. Will took a seat, lowering himself carefully to not hurt his back. Hannibal only sat once he was satisfied that Will was comfortable.

"He's decided to babysit me. He now thinks I'm fragile, like a teacup," Will gave Hannibal a pointed look, only looking away once he knew that the other understood the reference.

"Will needed transportation as his vehicle is here, although hopefully no longer considered evidence," he responded, making a point not to take Will's bait. Jack looked back and forth between the two of them to make sure they were done before he pulled out a notepad and a pen. His full attention was turned to Will then, who reached out to pluck up the pen. Jack stopped him.

"I want to talk first. Before we make any official notes," Jack said. He leaned back in his chair, folding his hands over his stomach. "Tell me what happened. Starting from the medical transport."

"Ah," Will sat back also, abandoning the pen. "I … I knew I was being set up. I knew that no matter what I said, the evidence would prove that I was guilty, and I knew I was unreliable… I'd been half convinced I was capable, that I actually could... I was losing time, Jack. You

knew it, Hannibal knew it. It's not unheard of for people to do things during dissociative episodes they otherwise wouldn't do."

"Yes. I'm aware. But what did you do, Will?" Jack pressed.

Staring at the wall behind Jack, Will went quiet. He had planned to come in, write a basic statement down, collect his belongings from when he'd been arrested, and call Alana to tell her to drop her dogs off at home for him so they'd be there to greet him when he got there. He'd sleep. He'd get up and go to work in the morning like the last few weeks had been nothing but a bad dream. Instead he sat in a chair, both Jack and Hannibal staring at him, and all he could think about was how he'd escaped and found peace in a pool of blood, held at the surface by a creature speaking to him in tongues.

Life was easier there.

"Perhaps Will's trauma is too severe for a recounting of his ordeal just yet," Hannibal spoke up. Will had been quiet long enough to worry him.

"I'm collecting my thoughts," Will shot back at him. "Swollen brain."

"About that," Jack said, turning his attention from Will to Hannibal. "Why is it that encephalitis so severe could be missed? Was there ever a consideration for a second opinion?"

Hannibal leveled his gaze with Jack, considering if the man was challenging him or simply asking questions to understand the full picture. He forced his body to relax to convey honesty and he spoke with a hint of regret. "Dr. Sutcliffe had been a trusted friend and a well-regarded neurologist. I had no reasons to doubt his expertise. Had I any reasons to believe he was withholding pertinent information regarding Will's health, I would have secured a second opinion."

"I told you to doubt it. I knew something was wrong," Will said.

"And not believing you will remain one of my most dire regrets," Hannibal replied.

"Yeah. You and everyone else," Will muttered. He rubbed his hands on his thighs, worry getting to him and making him feel like his hands were getting sweaty. "Anyway. I escaped. I'm sure you figured out how once the guards woke up. I remember seeing Alana, seeing how scared she was of me. How much she *believed* I was a killer. So I went to Hannibal. I waited for him, to talk to him, because if anyone was going to help me and actually listen to me, it would be him. It all just made too much sense from an outside perspective, but it didn't make sense to me. I couldn't do all of it, Jack. I … I could do some of it. I could have… But I lost time again. I slipped back into a nightmare."

"And what nightmare is that, Will?" Jack asked.

Will shook his head and shrugged. "The next thing I knew, I was in the hospital missing a kidney."

“Can you identify the Ripper, Will?” Jack pressed, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his desk as he stared at the other.

“... No,” it came out as a whisper.

The man across from him sighed and rubbed his eyes. He put the pen and paper away, then leaned back in his chair to watch Will for a moment before speaking again. “Here’s what the official report will be: You knew you were innocent and you were desperate to prove it, so you escaped. While you were gone, the Ripper found you and took you, which was easy because of how sick you were. Work on it and come back in a few days to write it up and sign it. In the meantime, we’re trying to make sense of the reason behind the Ripper committing the copycat killings and why he would include you in a display, alive. When will you be able to look at the files?”

“That is highly inappropriate, Agent Crawford,” Hannibal cut in before Will could respond. “You are asking a victim to work on his own case.”

“Will is a smart man and I’m sure he wants to know who and why they were framing him,” Jack challenged.

That small spark of rage Hannibal had felt when given courtesy by Jack nights before almost took hold, but before he could reply, the office door was pushed open. The smell of perfume, worry, and dogs hit him. Alana Bloom. The three turned their attention to the intrusion, but she was already by Will, throwing her arms around his shoulders in a tight hug. Tension melted from the room and Hannibal made a mental note to punish Jack at a later date. In the meantime, he sat back and waited to see what amount of anger Alana would turn on the man for him.

“What are you doing here?” Will asked as she pulled away from the hug.

“I got a text that you checked yourself out of the hospital and that you were trying to go to work already,” she said, sending a smile Hannibal’s way.

“Conspiring against me,” he laughed and turned his attention back to Jack. “I want to see them. Tomorrow. I’ll come to work tomorrow.”

“What?” Alana leaned against Jack’s desk, crossing her arms as she looked around the room at the three men.

“Will needs to see the tableaus. He’s our best bet to catch the Ripper before he completes his sounder. He’s done two and they were within days of each other. Seeing it also might make him remember something. This is the closest we’ve ever gotten,” Jack said. Alana’s mouth thinned into a disappointed line, her eyes hardening as Jack spoke.

“Jack, he just got out of the hospital. Today. He’s not even finished his round of medication for his encephalitis,” she stood then, turning to face him. Placing herself between Will and Jack as best as she could. Hannibal smiled.

“Will,” he said, leaning over and grasping his shoulder with a firm grip. “I am going to leave you in the safety of her hands. Please call me if you need someone to talk with.”

“Thank you, Dr. Lecter,” Will said with a half-smile.

Hannibal stood and interrupted Alana and Jack just long enough to bid the room farewell. He stepped out of the office, although reluctantly. He knew he had to give Will space. If he could wrap him up and bring him back to his home without Will pushing him away, he would. But the man was independent, if not by default then by choice, and until he was able to break down that wall, Hannibal would have to bide his time. He had him back now; he would push for Will to not only continue his therapy sessions on his usual night, but to add a second night per week. One night to act as if life were normal again and a second night to handle to trauma of being a victim of the Chesapeake Ripper. All Hannibal had to do now was to be patient.

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; TUESDAY, 15:47

“Who is this?” Will asked from his spot on the ground, where he was being greeted by the usual pack plus one. They had driven to his home in separate cars--Jack made sure Will got his car back, along with everything else they took from him when he was arrested--and it felt good to be home. It was strange that he had a police car posted in his driveway with two officers in the car, but it was good.

“That’s Applesauce. She’s mine. I adopted her,” Alana admitted, leaning down to pet Winston once he was done greeting Will.

“Have I rubbed off on you?” Will asked, standing once he was done. “I thought you’d want to get rid of all memories of me. I was afraid you’d get rid of my dogs.”

Alana gave him a pained smile and shrugged. She reached down to catch Applesauce’s collar then hooked her leash on her. She wasn’t planning to stay long, Will realized. She was still unsure of him in private.

“Yeah, well, all the evidence pointed in a pretty grim direction,” she said with a soft laugh. “I adopted her because I saw the good in it.”

She had been searching for a reason why she’d ever liked Will, looking for something good in him, he realized. Will pushed his hands into his coat pocket and he remembered it wasn’t his, but Hannibal’s. He pulled the stuffed dog out of a pocket and looked at it, second guessing his earlier decision to give it to the dogs to destroy. He’d had that idea when he still thought he was going to spend the rest of his days staring at Chilton’s smug face from the deepest, darkest basement cell of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane.

“What’s that?” Alana asked.

“Bev got it for me. Hospital giftshop,” Will said. He held the toy out to her. “Here, for Applesauce. A congratulations on avoiding shelter euthanasia gift.”

“She thanks you,” Alana huffed a laugh, reaching out and taking the toy. They stood there for a few minutes, Alana watching Will, Will with his hands shoved into Hannibal’s coat’s pockets as he watched Applesauce try and get to his pack to play, only to be thwarted by the leash. “Are you going to be okay tonight?”

“Yeah. I’m going to take my nightly round of horse pills then sleep in my own bed,” Will said, unhappily remembering Hannibal’s insistence on them waiting at the hospital’s pharmacy for his medications, since he hadn’t trusted Will to fill them at a pharmacy in Wolf Trap once he got home. “Are you okay?”

“I’m handling it,” Alana admitted. “Abigail was… She would have been okay, I like to think.”

Will nodded, kicking his foot on the ground a bit. He didn’t have the heart to tell her that he knew Abigail helped her father. No one needed to know at this point. The only thing that would come from people knowing would be tabloid trash on Tattlecrime and Abigail’s name dragged through the mud by true crime authors trying to outsell other authors. It would be best to let her rest as only a victim, doomed to die by the hands of another, sympathized by the masses.

“Thank you. For watching them,” Will said. He walked towards his porch steps, then turned to look at Alana for a moment. “I’m uh… I’m sorry. For scaring you.”

“You were sick, Will. You couldn’t help it,” Alana’s voice cracked a bit as she spoke. Emotional, even when she tried to cover it. Will did like that about her. It was more human, less psychiatrist. “I did try to tell them it had to be something else. But you know how Jack can be.”

Will hugged the coat closer to himself. “Yeah. I know.”

“Don’t go to work tomorrow. He’s wrong. You aren’t the key to solving the case,” Alana said, staring off at the dogs where Will was also looking. “You need to take care of yourself.”

“Yeah. I know,” Will repeated. He whistled for his dogs and they all came trotting to the porch. He stepped up and held the door open for them. Will knew what Alana was saying was true, but she knew him as well as she knew Jack. “Have a good night.”

“Goodbye, Will.”

He stood in the doorway and watched as Alana loaded Applesauce into the backseat of her car then got in herself. He waved as she backed out and then waited until her car turned onto the road before he disappeared into the house. It was a mess; they had searched it, turning drawers and cabinets out. From where he stood by the doorway, he could tell there would be a lot more missing than he got back from Jack. If he was lucky, most of his shit would be in a few cardboard boxes waiting for him on his desk when he got to work tomorrow.

With a deep sigh, he made his way to the kitchen where he pulled bottles of pills out of the coat pockets. He read them, figuring out which ones he had to take for the night. He took

them with a handful of water from the faucet. The dogs were fed. He put their beds back in place by the space heater, which he turned on for them.

Will stood over them for a while, contemplating falling down onto the floor and laying with them for the night. The only thing that stopped him was that he didn't want to take Hannibal's coat off yet. It was warm and it smelled familiar. Safe. So instead, he made his way to his bed. It had been stripped during the search, so he found a blanket to throw over the bare mattress and laid down. He curled up on his side, pulled the coat tight around his neck and shoulders, and he drifted off to sleep while thinking of the stag carrying him through the woods.

ad normalis

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; WEDNESDAY, 17:25

Hannibal was a creature of habit. He would never deny this, least of all to himself. He had stocked his own reserves quite nicely during the days when Silvestri was on the loose and he could easily use his crimes to cover up his own. However, two tableaus in and the man was itching to host a dinner party. The perfect excuse was a byproduct of his own desires to free Will of his imprisonment; he would host a party in honor of his friend coming home safely and mostly in one piece.

The biggest obstacle is Will Graham himself.

He stood in his kitchen, perusing his recipes, as soft classical music filled the room and a decanter of wine sat next to him, yet untouched while he let it breathe. Perhaps he could work his desires of hosting a dinner party that Will would never attend into his plans to endear the man to himself. He would mention his plans to Will during a therapy session, or perhaps while just speaking to one another as friends. He could even ask Will to come help, to choose recipes. A date could be set. Will could dread it, would attempt to get out of attending even. Then perhaps, something could happen which would cause the party to be cancelled at the last minute. After all, he had no intentions of sharing Will's kidney with the undeserving.

Hannibal smiled to himself. He plucked a recipe card out and set it on the counter.

In the meantime, Hannibal needed a valid reason for why he would know details of Will's crime scene so that he may discuss them with Will himself. He had not been invited after its discovery; perhaps Jack felt guilty for bringing him to Abigail's display, or he did not want to call him so early in the morning. He reached for his phone and dialed Jack Crawford.

"Crawford speaking," came the man's gruff voice after less than one ring. He often did not answer the phone in such a manner for Hannibal; either he was upset over their last parting or he hadn't checked the caller ID. He chose to believe the latter. It would make the conversation easier.

"Jack. Good evening," Hannibal nearly purred. "I would like to apologize for leaving so quickly yesterday when we had not had time to finish our discussion."

"Dr. Lecter, good evening," Jack's voice had calmed. Hannibal knew it would; he always put on airs around him, as if he too were a sophisticated man. "It's no trouble. How can I help you?"

"I would like to extend an invitation to you and your Bella to join me for dinner tomorrow evening."

“I would never deny myself one of your fabulous meals,” Jack said with a smile to his voice. “Is this perhaps bribery to keep me from hounding Will?”

“You’ve caught me,” Hannibal laughed, his own private amusement for him to enjoy and Jack to never know. “Perhaps not for the reason you believe. I would actually like you to bring the files for both his tableau and Abigail’s. Will will want to talk about them at our next therapy session. I would like to go into these discussions well prepared.”

Jack didn’t respond immediately. Hannibal knew he wouldn’t. He had to consider the benefits of giving FBI files to Will’s unofficial psychiatrist; he had to know it would mean Will would go back to him, to help him. He would agree, as Hannibal had been nothing but helpful for all Jack knew. Hannibal would not argue his case though. Jack could come to his own conclusion.

“My Bella has been under the weather, Dr. Lecter,” Jack said in lieu of an answer. “She has had a limited palate.”

“Not to worry, my friend,” Hannibal reassured. “I will choose a menu that is easy on the stomach but full of vital nutrients for an ailing body.”

“Then we will be there. What time?”

“Seven, if you’re amenable,” Hannibal said.

“Yes. I’ll bring the files for you, but Bella won’t want us to talk shop,” Jack warned.

“Of course. My lips will stay sealed. We shall have only appropriate dinner conversations,” Hannibal said before they gave their farewells and ended the call. With a frown, he placed the recipe card back into its place and began looking anew.

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; WEDNESDAY, 18:00

Will didn’t go to work. He had spent his day in bed. He hadn’t meant to. He honestly meant to get up and take his dogs down to the river, to go fishing and relax once he decided work actually wasn’t a good idea, that Alana and Hannibal had been right. But after breakfast and his first round of daytime medications, he realized that his flyfishing gear was gone. Every bit of it. The materials, the tools to make flies, the finished ones. His rods, the line. His scaling knife.

After that, he spent about an hour putting his living room back together. Then he checked his phone. No calls, no texts. He threw the card that Bev got him away. He tried to locate his laptop, then remembered it was probably at Quantico. Instead he checked his emails on his phone. It was mostly spam. He tried to sign into his academy email. He was locked out. After that, he laid down in bed.

Once was time to take his evening medications, he got back up. Another handful of water, another round of meds done. He wandered into the bathroom and caught his reflection. His beard was too long for his liking. His hair was longer too, but he didn't mind the length. His eyes were tired despite doing nothing all day. Will looked away before he could consider why and checked for his razors.

They were gone too.

He slammed the medicine cabinet shut and kicked his vanity. Will stomped out of the bathroom and grabbed Hannibal's coat, throwing it on as he whistled to the dogs. He shoved boots on then let the pack out, going outside with them. He felt like if he didn't go outside and stare at the sky, he would scream. The cops turned their attention to him for a moment and he gave them a fake grin and waved, before sitting down on his porch steps. He watched the dogs as they marked territory, pissing on each other's, sniffing, finding sticks and trying to initiate a chasing game. Will missed this.

His phone found its way out of his pocket and he went through his call log. There were no missed calls from when he was gone, not even from the hours before news must have broken that he was being arrested. Everyone in his social circle had thought he was an escaped killer after that. He was sure the world had.

Will clicked on Hannibal's name and stared as the screen changed to show it was dialing. He held the phone to his ear and waited. It rang long enough that Will thought it would go to voicemail, but then the other man's voice came through with a simple, "Will" in greeting.

"Hey," he said after a moment. He hadn't planned on what to say. "Thank you."

"Is everything alright?" Hannibal asked.

Will huffed, "Can't say 'you're welcome?'"

"I would if I knew what I was being thanked for," Hannibal responded as if he were distracted. Will listened for a moment. He could hear a light scratching in the background. He wondered if Hannibal was writing or drawing. "I could ask, 'Can't answer a question?'"

"For being there when I woke up," Will said. He had spent the day ignoring this feeling, but he'd spent the last few months ignoring his own wellbeing and it ended with life in the hands of a serial killer. This was something small he could handle. "And for driving me. I uh, didn't have my wallet. Couldn't have taken a cab."

Hannibal was silent for a long time. Will listened closely. Whatever he had been doing, he'd stopped. The scratching sound was gone. He could hear him breathing and it helped to know he was still there. Eventually, Hannibal drew a more audible breath in and spoke.

"In my youth, I spent many years walking alone when I would have benefitted from companionship. I see myself in you and I do not wish for you to suffer the same fate," he said. The scratching resumed.

Will laughed. "What, so I'm lonely?"

“Are you not lonely?” Hannibal asked, sounding distracted once more.

“I would say there’s a difference between being alone and being lonely,” Will argued, but his heart wasn’t in it. He balanced the phone between his shoulder and ear to free his hand, then hugged the coat closer around himself. It was getting darker and colder. “What am I interrupting?”

“I’m creating a menu,” Hannibal said. The scratching stopped and Will could hear Hannibal drinking something, probably an expensive wine. Will thought back to his own kitchen, wondering if he should put it back together before he finished the living room. He hadn’t bothered making coffee this morning. He just kept drinking out of his hand at the sink like some kind of sad bachelor. Will huffed to himself. Maybe he was lonely.

“Planning on switching from psychiatry to catering?”

“Mmm, no. Although I would excel in that field, I would be doing a disservice to my patients,” Hannibal’s voice had a smile in it. “I am planning to host a dinner party, which I would like you to attend. I feel that a celebration of life is in order.”

Will pulled the phone away from his head to stare at it for a moment, as if doing so would allow Hannibal to see the confused look on his face. Realizing he couldn’t, Will put it back to his ear and shook his head. Hannibal could not see that either. “I don’t do well in social settings.”

“I would excuse you spending your evening in the corner or by my side, ignoring the other attendees.”

“Your other attendees,” Will said that word with disgust, “would not be able to ignore me. You saw how everyone was acting. It was … *performative sympathy*.”

“Performative is a choice word,” Hannibal mused. Will heard the scratching stop again. He wondered if Hannibal was looking at something or sitting there waiting for him to elaborate. Will chose to remain silent. Hannibal began writing again.

“My appointment still stands?” Will asked instead.

“Yes. And I have reserved a second day for you,” Hannibal said. “Same time, on Tuesdays.”

“Are you trying to monopolize my time, Dr. Lecter?” He had no idea why he asked it, but there it was. Will closed his eyes and rubbed them with his free hand, silently chastizing himself for still pushing back against the one person he felt like he could call and talk to. Hannibal was the only person who wouldn’t play nice while pitying him.

“I am offering my support by alloting extra time to dedicate to conversations,” Hannibal’s response came quickly and without judgement. Will was glad for that.

Will didn’t respond. He sat on his porch, watching his dogs mill around. Winston came over and threw himself down on the step next to Will, and Will reached down to pet him. It was nice to just sit there and ignore the mess of his house, to watch the pack now that they got

some energy out, to listen to the breathing of another person. It was getting late though and he had to feed the dogs. Maybe even feed himself.

“Well, I just wanted to say thank you. Goodnight, Hannibal,” Will said finally.

“I will see you at your appointment, Will. Earlier, if you need me,” Hannibal said. Will appreciated how honest he sounded. He hung up the call and whistled to the dogs. They came back as he stood, and he rewarded them each with pets before letting them inside. He went about his evening routine measuring their food out and feeding them. He was hungry but his kitchen was all picked through and unorganized, so Will decided to tackle putting it back together first. He’d finish the living room tomorrow.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the short chapter!
I am also going to go back and update the location/times with more details so any time jumps, big or small, are less confusing for everyone.

maeror

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; THURSDAY, 10:02

One of the consequences of lying in bed for an entire day was staying awake for an entire night. Will had put his kitchen back together. He had gone through the fridge and thrown everything away that had been growing mold during the past two weeks, then he had eaten a sad meal of buttered pasta just to stop the nausea his medication was causing. Once the sun started painting the sky pink and orange, he put on a pot of coffee. He took his morning rounds of pills, showered and dressed, and stood in the middle of his living room.

He did not feel like putting his living room back together.

So, after tending to his dogs, Will found himself in his car and pulling out of his driveway. He needed to go to the store; he had no food, he wanted razors to shave, he needed more trash bags. He did not take the turn that would bring him to the nearest Walmart. Instead, a fifty minute commute later, he was pulling up to his usual parking spot at work. Worst case scenario, boxes of his own stuff would be released back to him and he wouldn't have to buy new things from the store. Best case scenario, he'd be allowed to go back to work. Working meant he could look at the case file, he could start piecing together what happened while he was missing. Why it happened.

Will had spent the night cleaning mostly to avoid thinking about it. He didn't want to think about all the things clawing their way into his mind until he had all the information.

He felt desperate enough that in a moment of weakness somewhere around three in the morning, he had pulled Tattlecrime's website up on his phone. One big, red title later and he had closed the tab. Her opinions weren't worth looking at, no matter how much he wanted to know about what had gone on while he was missing.

Now within the walls of the Bureau, he kept his eyes planted on the floor about ten feet ahead of himself as he navigated the halls, and each time a pair of legs moved out of his way, he felt relief. If he had to suffer a repeat of two days before with people approaching him with their pitying eyes and empty words, he would have lost his nerve and probably would have taken himself all the way back to Wolf Trap. Thankfully he made it all the way to his own desk, where he practically threw himself down into his chair.

With a grimace, Will realized that they had gone through his desk too. Everything was out of place.

From across the room, Will heard someone clear their throat. He looked up, only to see Zeller and Price staring at him from their own desks.

"Should you be back here already?" Price was the first one to break the awkward silence.

"I don't see why not," Will shrugged. "Just because I was arrested and kidnapped doesn't mean I'm not still working the case."

Zeller whistled, a long drawn out one as he gave Price a ‘really?’ look. He turned away and returned to whatever he’d been doing on his computer. Price shot Zeller a stern look, then leaned back in his chair to stare at Will.

“I mean, I just don’t get it. If I were you, I’d be on a beach somewhere far, far away from here being wined and dined by cutthroat lawyers who’d want my case just for the fame,” Price said with a laugh. “I’d never work *or* step foot in the Ripper’s stomping grounds again.”

Will stared at him for a moment, before looking away. He powered his own computer on. “We don’t know where his ‘stomping grounds’ end.”

“Fair point,” Price muttered. He clicked on his mouse a few times, then leaned back in his chair again. “Hey, what do you know about Cardinalis cardinalis symbolism?”

“Heard people say cardinals show up with messages from the recently deceased,” Will answered. “Why?”

“No reason,” Price looked away quickly and started typing on his keyboard.

“William Middle Name Graham,” Bev’s voice. He looked up and she was in the doorway, looking angry. No, she was looking concerned. “What the fuck are you doing here? You should be at home. Or at therapy. Did your therapist doctor friend approve this?”

“My psychiatrist doctor friend would be miffed you called him a therapist,” Will said, offering her a smile to try to disarm her. “And no. My house is torn apart. I couldn’t take another day of it.”

The smile didn’t work, but the reminder that days ago they had all been convinced he was a cold-blooded serial killer did. Bev’s shoulders relaxed and she made her way across the room to his desk. Leaning her hip against it, she crossed her arms over her chest as she returned his smile down at him.

“You still shouldn’t be here yet. Has Crawford talked to you yet? I’m sure he wants you to get another psych eval, even if it’s just to cover his own ass,” Bev wasn’t going to drop it.

Will sighed and stared at his computer screen. It had an administrator lock on it. He hit the power button, too bitter to shut it down properly. “No. I still need to give my official statement.”

“Before you do, how does coffee sound?” Bev asked. Will met her eyes, seeing nothing but genuine concern. No pity, no fear. “My treat.”

“Okay,” Will nodded. He stood and followed her out of the room. Down the halls. Peoples’ legs didn’t move as far away as quickly as they had when he was walking by himself. He thought he must seem more human walking with another person beside him. Going through the motions of getting a coffee--muddy and burnt--from the cafeteria was easy, nice. Sitting in the uncomfortable, too modern for the old building chairs was easy too. The mottled fake

stone print on the pressed wood table was interesting enough to concentrate on as he spun the heat sleeve around his cup.

Bev was staring at him. He looked up at her cheek and raised his eyebrows, questioning her. They hadn't spoken since they left their office. Will knew what was coming, but he was hoping it wouldn't and they could just sit in companionable silence until she broke down and invited him in to help on the case.

"Really. Why are you here?" Bev had that soft, careful tone to her voice that he'd heard her use with victims of crimes, standing on a paper sheet as she took tape to their clothes and combs to their hair. It made his stomach turn over itself.

"I didn't want to be at home," he said, his tone and words much nicer this time than before.

"Yeah, I get that. I wouldn't either. But why did you come here?" Her tone hadn't changed.

Will took a long sip of his coffee, savoring the cheap, familiar flavor as he considered what information he should or shouldn't divulge. If he admitted he couldn't sleep through the night, she'd ask why. If she asked why, he'd have to think about why. He knew why, but he was blaming it on laying down all day. If he told her he had no where else to go, she'd think it was pathetic. Instead, he settled for petty: "I couldn't go fishing. My gear was taken."

"Okay. Okay, don't. Don't do that," Bev groaned and then took her own gulp of coffee. She shifted uncomfortably, then looked away, across the room. "If it helps, I wasn't convinced it was really you. Like, who eats a whole human ear *raw*?"

How unexpected that question was got a laugh out of Will. An inappropriate, loud laugh. "Apparently me."

"Apparently. Or it was just in your sink as some kind of warning and you threw up on it," Bev said with a shrug. Will glanced up at her as she kept her attention across the room. She had been thinking about it, coming to conclusions that made him seem less weird, less insane, now that they knew he hadn't done any of the shit they thought. Now that they knew he had been physically ill, losing time not because of insanity or lying, but because his brain was swollen. He closed his eyes and tried not to remember the feeling of Abigail's ear coming up his throat, the way it tasted, how chewy it had felt between his teeth before he spit it out.

"I want to look at the files," Will blurted out. "I can't … see it. How it was done. Why."

"Maybe you shouldn't see. We're working on it, Will. All of us," she said as she looked back at him. "Are you okay? Like, being at home with just your dogs?"

Bev was asking if he was scared to be at home. The reason he couldn't sleep. Will returned to spinning the heat sleeve around the base of his cup. There were cops posted in his driveway but they couldn't see the back of his house, and it's not like the Ripper was against killing police officers. The killer had clearly been in his home on multiple occasions over the last several months, to collect souvenirs and plant evidence, to force feed him human flesh. It was another reason he needed to see the crime scene photographs, to read the file. He wanted to understand. To find out why. Why him, why now?

“No,” he admitted finally, quietly.

“Do uh… If you need to crash somewhere…” Bev was offering her place up for him to stay, but he could tell she didn’t mean it. Will broke the tension purposefully with a laugh and shook his head. He forced a genuine-looking smile.

“Bev, it’s okay. There’s *police protection* there,” he said in a light tone.

“Oh thank God. I have so much shit going on right now,” she laughed back. Bev relaxed back into her chair and Will mirrored her, again trying to keep the tension away. To make her feel better so her concerns about him would dissipate. Another sip of coffee later and she gasped, “Oh fuck. I didn’t mean that.”

For the second time, she got a real laugh out of him. “No, no. It’s good. That made me feel … normal. Less like a freak who’s got a serial killer for a stalker.”

“It’s the eyelashes,” Bev said jokingly. “I’m surprised you only have one stalker with those baby blues of yours.”

“Shut up,” Will scoffed and looked away, staring off where she had been looking earlier, but he was smiling. “I guess I should let you get back to work. I should go see Jack.”

“Or we can go check your shit out of evidence so you can go fishing,” Bev suggested with a grin.

They finished off their coffees in agreement that she’d go with him to get his stuff. The two made their way back through the halls, Will much more at ease than he had been earlier. Things could easily return to normal; he’d have a few days to himself, to fish, to finish recovering from his encephalitis and his forced nephrectomy. Everyone would get over their guilt of believing he was a murderer. He’d talk to Hannibal at his now bi-weekly conversation appointments and weasle his way out of attending a fancy dinner party. Eventually he’d get his classes back and he’d return to teaching. Jack would need him to help profile a killer. The Chesapeake Ripper would stage a third tableau.

Will’s stomach flipped at the realization and his coffee tried to make its way up. He swallowed hard and stopped walking, leaning his back against the nearest wall and closing his eyes tight. The Ripper wasn’t done. He had survived but it didn’t mean he would survive the final kill of the current sounder.

He took a deep breath. Then another. He slowly let the air out of his nose as he let the fluorescent lights and sad gray walls disappear from his mind. Seeking safety. The dark forest, the copper smell of blood. Warmth.

A hand landed hard on his shoulder, causing Will to jump. He looked around wildly as if he didn’t know where it would have come from, until he realized he was standing in the same hall he’d been in moments before. Jack was standing in front of him, his hand on his shoulder, looking down at him with a frown. Will pushed his hand off of himself.

“Will. Come with me,” Jack demanded, turning to walk off.

Bev fell into step next to Will as they followed the director back towards his office. She threw a look at him reminescent of a kid worried about their friend being called to the principal's office, then when that didn't work to make Will loosen up, she elbowed him. He smiled to make her feel better then, satisfied, she parted ways to head back to the lab.

Jack held the door for Will, who stepped in and waited to see if the other was going to make this formal or informal. The director made his way to his desk, rounding it before he seated himself. He motioned for Will to take a seat. Formal it was. Will remained standing.

"Do you want to tell me why you didn't call before coming in? Again?" Jack asked.

"I just came to get my stuff," Will half lied. "Didn't think that required permission."

Jack gave him a steely look before turning his attention to his computer. He clicked the mouse, typed and clicked again, then turned the monitor around for Will to be able to see. He motioned for the other to at least come close enough to see, and he reluctantly obliged by sitting in the chair closest to where he could see whatever Jack wanted him to look at. He fished his glasses off his shirt and put them on so he could focus, only to realize Jack had a Tattlecrime article pulled up. Will groaned and sat back. It was the same title as the article he'd almost read in the middle of the night.

"I know, I know. 'Tabloid trash.' But look at me Will," Jack said. Will did. "She's accusing you of working *with* the Chesapeake Ripper."

"That's insane," Will huffed.

"She writes, '*the convenience of the timing only proves that Will Graham has successfully pulled off what should be the impossible: working both for the FBI and the Chesapeake Ripper,'"* the agent read, his tone angry. "I'm not going to dance around this. She's drumming up suspicions. Suspicions that I have to investigate because they're setting off alarms with people far, *far* above my paygrade."

"You, you … you know that's not true, Jack," Will threw his hands up and, just as he was about to stand up and leave, he laughed. It made sense, didn't it? He had ruined the Ripper's plans to frame him for murder when he escaped. The plan never considered his escaping custody. The Ripper was framing him so he couldn't work on any cases involving him and since he escaped, the rules of the game had to change. The Ripper pivoted to a new plan that would serve a better, more interesting purpose. Will turned his attention fully to Jack, making eye contact. Being honest and showing it. Proving it. "He's framing me, again."

Jack let out a long sigh and rubbed his forehead, then leaned back in his chair and held his hands out to his sides, imploring Will. "What evidnece do you have to support that?"

"Look. You sent a student after him before. She was close enough that he felt it was necessary to take her. Not only to take her, but to keep her alive long enough that he could use her--part of her to send you a message. What makes you think he isn't using me? Framing me, whether for murder or for consorting with him, could even be another message."

Will waited while Jack stared at him, watching him as he considered what he'd just heard. Eventually, Jack relaxed. What he was saying did make sense. "And what message would that be?"

"That he's untouchable," Will said, then looked away. He could feel Jack staring at him, mulling over his words.

"I need you to give you official statement. I'll rubberstamp it. Then you need a psych eval, but it won't be with Dr. Lecter," Jack said, his tone serious, edging on grave. Will knew he was preparing for an argument, but he didn't have it in him to fight over procedure. He had expected this and had already prepared himself. Hannibal had been an unofficial compromise to his refusal to see an FBI-approved psychiatrist as it was, and then the man ended up getting involved in the Hobbs case, in Abigail. Will nodded, showing Jack he wouldn't fight it. "Good. I'll set it up. In the meantime, Dr. Lecter told me he will see you twice a week. It's a requirement."

"Officially?"

"It's *my* requirement," Jack spoke firmly.

"He told me already."

"Good," Jack didn't drop the firm tone. "I want you back on the case. I want you to prove to me that you're in the right corner."

The anger Will felt for Freddie Lounds in that moment was visceral. Images of breaking her hands so she couldn't type, of gouging her eyes out so she couldn't see crime scenes flashed before him. He closed his eyes, swallowing down the rage and hate he felt, before he dipped his chin in solemn agreement. Will didn't have to look at Jack to know he was suspicious of everything; suspiscious of his involvement in the copycat murders, of how evidence could have been planted, of who could have such intimate knowledge of the cases enough to act on them, of why he was returned after only a week while Miriam Lass had been missing for years. Jack was a smart man, and so was Will, so he could see how the situation looked from an outside perspective. How guilty he still looked in the eyes of those who understood killers.

"Interview room 2, in twenty minutes. I won't be taking the statement," Jack said after Will's silent agreement. He had softened, satisfied with the empath's obedience. "I would have if you'd called, but I have plans for the evening. Dr. Lecter has invited my Bella and me to dinner."

With that, Jack stood, prompting Will to stand too. He took a moment to glance at Jack's face to get a sense of him; he was guarded, but willing to believe him, willing to take Will's side of the story as if it was truth. Willing to go up against higher ups if he needed to. Will said a quick goodbye and left, not sure if he should try going back to his desk or just wait outside the interview room until whoever was going to take his statement showed up.

The latter seemed like a better option than finding out of Bev had gone to fetch Jack during his panic attack or if his showing up had been a coincidence.

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BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; THURSDAY, 12:15

Hannibal stood in the lobby of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, tempering his irritation that he had been kept waiting after agreeing to arrive there at noon. He had been called by Frederick Chilton earlier that morning, who called to inform him that a certain Abel Gideon has been alluding to true knowledge of who the Chesapeake Ripper is, that his eyes have been opened to the truth. The problem Chilton had was that Gideon was refusing to speak to anyone about what he may know except for one person: Dr. Hannibal Lecter.

It had been an interesting call.

Chilton told him that Gideon was returned to his care, not by his request, but by a judge who errantly believed that placing him back under the control of a victim would be a fit punishment. Hannibal had smiled in amusement as Chilton complained that the judge had been blinded by his twisted view on justice, unable to see his own perspective, unable to see why he wouldn't want to have his attacker under his care. The judge had told him he was a smart man, a capable man. Mere hours later, Gideon was returned to the cell he had called home before his escape. Chilton had not greeted him. He hadn't even spoken to Gideon until he put the idea in one of the attending's heads that he knew who the *real* Chesapeake Ripper is, having found out during his field trip to the outside world. The attending convinced Chilton to hear him out.

Whatever other circumstances had led to Chilton phoning Hannibal that morning, he left vague, talking around the subject. Hannibal knew Gideon most likely chided the man, telling him his unprofessional provocation of him was unwanted, that he wanted to speak to a real psychiatrist. He would ask for someone who wouldn't mess around with his version of reality until they got what they wanted, regardless of his own wellbeing. Chilton was easily ruffled, and Gideon would play on his own well-founded aversion to psychiatry to get what he wanted.

Just as Hannibal was about to check his watch for the third time, Chilton made his appearance. He limped out through a door, cane in hand, and offered the doctor a smile that did not meet his eyes. Hannibal offered the same.

"Dr. Lecter, pleased you could make it," he said, holding his free hand out for Hannibal to shake. He did, but only for pleasantries' sake.

"I will have to keep this visit brief, I am afraid. I have patients this afternoon, as well as doubts that your ward will be willing to divulge his secrets easily," Hannibal said, taking his hand back and placing it in his coat pocket, wiping his hand on the fabric. Chilton had clammy hands.

"Ah, no need to apologize," Chilton's fake smile grew wider. He walked back towards the door, Hannibal following him, and waited for an attending to open the door for him rather

than badging himself in. Self-importance annoyed Hannibal, particularly when it was unearned, but the man was far too useful to correct. “However, I must. I won’t be going with you to see Gideon. I have a rather strong distaste for the man,” he punctuated his statement by lifting his cane up, “and he has yet to forgive me for any misgivings he mistakenly believes I’m guilty of.”

“I believe I would feel the same,” Hannibal agreed vaguely. They walked in relative silence, the sound of shoes and the click of cane on tiles the only disruption to the quiet halls. They came upon another door, one that buzzed as it was unlocked, and an attending pushed it open from his side to let them through. The attending smiled broadly at the men; Hannibal noted that he did not seem to keep the same grim air about him as many of the others did. He seemed to enjoy his job. Hannibal wondered if perhaps the power that came along with it was what drew him to this particular vocation.

“Dr. Lecter, this is Matthew. He will be taking you to your destination,” Chilton said as he stopped near a door, a metal placard on it indicating that it was the man’s office. Hannibal made a mental note of where the office was located, then nodded to show Chilton he had understood. “He will bring you back here once you are done, if you have time to discuss what Gideon has to say.”

“Thank you, Frederick,” Hannibal said. Chilton disappeared into his office, Hannibal only turning his attention to Matthew once he heard the click of the latch.

“There are a few rules, Dr. Lecter,” Matthew started, unable to fully hide the amusement in his voice. He was young. Rash. Hannibal smiled at him as they began walking down the hall towards a stairwell that was retrofitted with metal caging. “We’ve had some issues with pissing contests, so stay behind the line indicated on the floor. Dr. Gideon doesn’t strike me as the type, but I wouldn’t risk that fancy suit of yours.”

The attending paused briefly as he badged them into the stairwell. They began descending into a large room that looked as if it was once grand, but now the intricately tiled floor lay barren save for several booth sized cages standing in a row. There was a small black folding chair sat in front of one, facing it. Facing the only occupied one.

“No touching, no handing anything off to the patient, nothing sexual,” he continued as they finished descending the stairs. He led Hannibal towards the cage. It housed Gideon, who sat on his chair, hands on his knees, head facing forward. Blank. Waiting. Hannibal wondered if he was nervous to see him. “He is a hawk, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal stopped walking. Matthew took two more steps before he realized and stopped, turning to face the man. He took a moment to study the young attending and mull over his choice of words and the almost mirthful shine in his eyes, before he spoke, quiet so as not to allow Gideon to hear.

“And you believe you are a hawk as well,” he pointed out.

“We understand each other,” Matthew said as he stared Hannibal directly in the eye, then after a pause he added, “Dr. Gideon and I.”

“Hawks are solitary creatures, often scared off by smaller birds.”

“They could remain dominant, if they worked together,” Matthew spoke as he turned again, to continue walking towards Gideon’s cage. This attending must be the one who convinced Chilton to take Gideon’s claims of knowing who the Ripper is seriously. He was a man in search of equals, which Hannibal could only recently appreciate. He was a young man though. Young, brash. Impressionable. Receptive.

“Ah, Dr. Hannibal Lecter,” Gideon’s voice, almost mechanical. Hannibal took his attention away from Matthew and settled his gaze on the caged man. “Here I was almost certain you would not show up.”

“Your friend kept me waiting,” Hannibal said. Matthew led him to the folding chair, to the line he should not cross. Hannibal looked down at the chair, then took off his coat and folded it, draping it over the back. He stepped across the line. Gideon tensed, barely perceptible to the untrained eye, but Hannibal saw it.

“Do you mind, Mr. Brown? We have big boy business to tend to,” Gideon looked over at the attending, offering him a smile. Offering friendship.

Matthew all but took a bow, smirking once again at Hannibal before he walked off back towards the stairs. Hannibal did not watch him leave, merely standing and waiting for Gideon to return his attention to him. Once he was satisfied Matthew was far enough away, the man looked back at the uncaged killer before him.

“You know, I heard from a little birdie that one of your dear friends *survived* Baltimore’s most notoriously brutal serial killer,” Gideon said. Hannibal took another step closer, watching him. “Imagine that.”

“Yes. Will is a very fortunate man. One may argue he has someone watching over him,” Hannibal took one last step towards the cage then stilled, keeping his gaze locked on Gideon’s. He had no reason to hide the predator that he was. The man already knew.

“Someone very powerful,” Gideon agreed. “Someone many people wouldn’t believe exists, not as they know him. Faith is funny like that.”

“Do you have faith, Dr. Gideon?” Hannibal asked.

The caged man stared at him, at his darkened eyes and frozen body, studying him. Hannibal could smell the fear permeating through the scents of cheap soap, bleach, old tiles, metal. Gideon broke eye contact and laughed, forcing his body to relax back into his seat.

“I believe that the only safe place for me is right where I am,” Gideon said finally. “I don’t suspect the Chesapeake Ripper often leaves those who know him alive. Not for very long, at least.”

“It would not fit his profile to leave loose ends untied,” Hannibal confirmed.

“That being said,” Gideon smiled, “I am glad Mr. Graham is a bad shot. I wouldn’t be blessed to be sitting here otherwise.”

After a silence that stretched on, Hannibal loosened. He looked at his watch, then adjusted his tie and suit jacket, slipping back into the image of himself. Gideon wanted only to taunt him it seemed, to hold over him the knowledge that he knows and yet, he survived. But Hannibal could tell he was afraid to give up the Ripper’s identity. He was afraid he wasn’t untouchable behind these bars, and he wanted to meet with Hannibal to decide whether he was safe or not.

Hannibal offered him a warm smile, one that did meet his eyes.

“Dr. Gideon, I have a busy schedule to keep. It was a pleasure to see you and I hope we may only ever meet on such good terms,” he said, returning to the chair to collect his coat. He donned it, but before walking off, he turned to look at Gideon one last time. The man seemed more relaxed. Assured. Hannibal really did have no reason to attempt anything; the man would never squeal. He had his safety.

“Goodbye, Dr. Lecter,” Gideon said. “Keep your Will safe.”

Allowing him to have the last word, Hannibal turned and walked back to the stairs, to where Matthew stood waiting. Hannibal had no doubts that their conversation had been recorded, nor any doubts that Matthew would listen to the recording once Chilton left for the day. Gideon was not a loose end, but he had unintentionally caused another. A man so convinced as he was that he required kinship in his solitude would know what to listen for. Hannibal harbored no doubts that Matthew Brown would attempt to contact him.

In silence, the attending brought Hannibal back up through the halls of the BSHCI, through the caged stairwell, down the hall past Chilton’s office, through another long hallway where Hannibal would be released back into the lobby. From there, he would step back into the world. He was glad the man who invited him here was rude enough to not see him out. Chilton would have ruined the moment; Hannibal stepped outside the doors of the hospital and closed his eyes, taking in the scents around him. The smell of concrete and asphalt, fallen leaves and crisp autumn air. He stood there, allowing himself to savor what a man like himself would not have if he were capable of being caught.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; THURSDAY, 19:00

“I wish you hadn’t brought that,” Bella said as Jack leaned between the two seats to pluck a briefcase out of the back of the car, as well as a bottle of wine. “You promised not to bring up any cases.”

Jack sat properly in his seat again once he had the case, then leaned over to his wife and kissed her cheek. She smiled at him, but she was still annoyed. He kissed her again then handed her the wine.

“I still promise no shop talk. I’m just going to hand it to him and then we are going to have a lovely evening,” he said, then he let himself out of the car. She started to get out on her own,

but he rushed around the hood, catching her partially open door to finish opening it for her. He held his hand out and she gave him an exaggerated look of exasperation, before she took it and allowed him to help her out of the car.

“You spoil me,” Bella chided playfully. He held his elbow out to her once she was steadied on her feet and he had shut the door. She took it and they walked up the path to Hannibal’s front door together, arm in arm. Bella needed the help nowadays, but she would never admit it. Jack would never expect her to, so he chose instead to roll his caring into bittersweet, romantic gestures.

“You deserve to be spoiled.” Jack pulled her slightly closer to himself in a half hug, half security measure as they went up the few steps to the door. He rang the doorbell, then turned his attention back to Bella, smiling at her. “You look lovely tonight.”

“Thank you, Jack,” she said softly, reaching up to fidget with the wrap she had chosen to wear around her head for the evening, purple and gold, tied in a bow to hide what her chemo treatment was beginning to do to her hair.

The door opened, flooding the stoop with warm light and the smell of a meal being cooked. Hannibal stood with a pleasant smile on his face. He stepped to the side, motioning for them to enter.

“Jack, beautiful Bella, please come in,” Hannibal said. He reached out to take the wine from Bella, eager to unburden her as Jack walked her inside. “Thank you for this.”

“It’s nothing, not in comparison to whatever that delicious smell is,” Jack damn near moaned. Hannibal shut the front door. Coats were shed then their host guided them to the dining room. He pulled a chair out for Bella, waiting until Jack helped her sit before helping her to tuck into the table. She thanked them for fussing over her but declared it unnecessary. Jack passed off the case he held to Hannibal, who merely nodded his thanks, then disappeared through the doorway to his kitchen. Jack leaned down to kiss the top of Bella’s head before moving to his side of the table and seating himself. A soft melody of piano played from a room off in the distance, loud enough to hear but not enough that it would disturb any conversation.

It was only moments later when the door swung open once more, Hannibal returning with three small bowls balanced in both hands. He placed the first in front of Bella, the second in front of Jack, and the third at his place at the table. With the grace of a practiced host, he picked up a decanter of white wine, pouring each of them a glass. Once done, he unbuttoned his jacket and sat.

“We start our meal together with an herb-rich soup made with a bone broth base, known as *tom kha gai*. In honor of the incoming winter, it is considered to have immune boosting properties and pairs nicely with the Riesling Trocken I’ve selected for this evening,” he said with a smile and lifted his spoon. His two dinner guests did the same. He waited until they took their first bites before taking his own. To the sounds of their satisfaction, he added, “The bone broth used in the base is homemade as well. I’ve put many hours into this dish and watching you two nourish your bodies with my hard work brings me joy.”

“This is quite delicious, Dr. Lecter,” Bella said with a soft smile. Jack beamed at her, taking another bite himself. “I have to admit, food has been … challenging, for me.”

“That is why I chose a culinary route I find many people often neglect. Unexpected flavors will not challenge your ability to enjoy the night in a way changing flavors of the familiar would,” Hannibal said with grace, knowing Bella was already experiencing the side effects of her unwanted situation. “And Bella, there is no need for formalities at my dining table. Please, call me Hannibal.”

They fell into companionable conversation, both Hannibal and Jack well aware of Bella’s desire to avoid work talk. It wasn’t until the first course was cleared and Hannibal had returned with the main course--*panang neau* made with what he claimed was beef heart on a bed of floral jasmine rice, paired with *galam plee pad nam pla* and a fresh cucumber *achat*, plated with the artistry of a five-star chef--that conversation dipped as close to work as either would allow.

“I’m concerned for Will,” Jack said, glancing at Bella briefly to assure her he wouldn’t mention anything more morbid than his wellbeing. “He came in today without calling first. I caught him having an episode in the hall.”

“An episode?” Hannibal’s interest was piqued. Will was on medications now and the swelling of his brain should be subsiding more and more each day. Whatever hallucinations and time loss he had been suffering should be minimal, if present at all.

“Something of the sort. Maybe a panic attack,” Jack mused, then took another sip of his wine.

“The man is entitled to panic attacks,” Bella said. “But shouldn’t he be at home, recovering?”

“Yes, he should,” Hannibal affirmed with a nod. “Tell me, Jack, how was he acting?”

“He was leaning against a wall with his eyes shut, breathing heavily and holding himself,” Jack said as he mimicked how Will had his arms wrapped around his own chest. “He wasn’t responding, even when Beverly was talking to him. He came back to when I touched his shoulder.”

Hannibal took a long sip of his wine then set his glass down and offered Bella a soft smile. “He is entitled to his panic attacks indeed. It was most likely a trauma response. I will speak with him about it tomorrow at his appointed time. If I feel it is necessary, I will personally see to it that he returns to the hospital for more testing.”

“Please do,” Jack requested. He finished off the last of his plate. Hannibal caught him checking to see if Bella had eaten, and he looked too. She had, more of the vegetables and rice than the meat, but Hannibal would not fault her for it. She had done her best. He rose then to clear the table, imploring Bella to stay seated and asking Jack for help. He stood too and assisted Hannibal in bringing dishes back into the kitchen.

“I have prepared dishes for you to take with you,” Hannibal said as he carefully lined dirty dishes up next to his sink. Jack did the same with the plates he carried. Once his guests left, Hannibal would clean. In the meantime, he made his way to his refrigerator where he pulled

out several glass containers filled with the remaining *tom kha gai* and the *achat*. Hannibal did not offer the other dishes he had prepared, as they were not to Bella's liking, and he would not have meat wasted. "If her palate has narrowed, she needs what she is able to handle."

"Thank you, Hannibal," Jack sounded truly touched. "I really did not expect this."

"What else are friends for, but support during hard times?" Hannibal said with a smile. Jack returned the smile and helped Hannibal in packing up a tote with the leftovers. Hannibal hesitated, then pulled the prepared dessert dishes out from the refrigerator. He would extend his graces further and not demand Bella eat any more this evening. "I will pack these for you as well."

"Thank you again. Tomorrow, we''ll eat the dessert after the leftovers. I don't think Bella could eat another bite tonight," Jack stated. While Hannibal packed up the dessert, the other man wandered over to the case that had the files in it. He tapped it, regret washing over his face. "They're gruesome, Hannibal. Are you going to be alright to see them? You seemed pretty shaken up when we found Abigail Hobbs."

Hannibal looked up at him, studying his body language, his stern face. With a nod, he returned to the food, but kept his own body language open, honest looking. "Yes. I have my own psychiatrist and if need be, I will visit her with any issues that arise. I still believe it will be in Will's best interest for me to be familiar with the crime scenes."

"You're a good man, Hannibal," Jack said. The other simply smiled at him and zipped up the tote. They returned to the dining room, eager to wrap the night up for reasons of their own. Jack pulled his wife's chair out for her and she stood, not willing to accept much more help for the evening. He still held his elbow out for her, and she did take it as he walked with her to the foyer, followed by their host. They shared pleasantries, put their coats back on, then stepped outside, the brisk late fall air a stark contrast to the warmth of Hannibal's home.

Jack let Bella lean on him as they made their way down the steps and towards the car. He was happy that she had a nice time, and glad that their friend seemed to care so much for them. Jack knew friendships were strained and people started drifting away once someone fell ill. It would be good to have a man like Hannibal in their lives.

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BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; FRIDAY 18:55

After Will had left his statement, he asked the agent who took it to help him get his stuff out of evidence. All Will had to do was look sad and shift on his feet uncomfortably when he asked, and enough guilt over what the FBI had accused Will of made the agent agree. Eight cardboard boxes and some fishing rods packed into his car later, he'd driven back home. The evening was spent going through the boxes, figuring out why they would take each specific item, and putting each one back in its rightful place. At a somewhat reasonable time, he ate three spoonfuls of peanut butter straight from the jar, took his medication with tap water, and crashed in bed.

Between his head not bothering him nearly as much, his incision hurting from all the movement, and wearing himself out with reorganizing his house, sleep came easily.

For the first time in months, Will had woken up feeling rested.

He took the dogs for a walk through the woods to the river. He fished. He caught enough to stock his fridge and freezer. He returned home, processed the fish and portioned the meat out. He ate a real lunch thanks to his catch. Once late afternoon rolled around, he showered. He finally shaved now that his razor was back in his possession, opting to go fully bare so he didn't have to worry about making his stubble even. He dressed. He undressed and dressed in something nicer. He tamed his curls then, once it dried, he untamed them by shaking his head and running his hand through his hair several times. Finally, he put a jacket on and gathered up Hannibal's coat to return it.

As an afterthought, he grabbed his medications to toss in his passenger. Just in case Jack called.

One drive to Baltimore later and Will was standing in the waiting room of Hannibal's office. He was five minutes early. He went through the door anyway.

"You're early," Hannibal's voice came from overhead. Will shut the door behind himself and looked up along the catwalk above the main floor until he caught sight of his friend, his back to the room, an open patient file in his hand.

"I wanted to return your coat before I was officially therapized for the evening," Will lied. He didn't know why he came in the door early. Hannibal could have still had a patient in the room.

He hung the coat up on the coat rack, then took his own jacket off and did the same. Will stared at the coat rack, concentrating on the feel of it against his hand. He remembered it falling, hitting the ground. It must have been when he had come to try and force Hannibal to go to Minnesota. He let go, trailing his fingers over the fabric of Hannibal's coat as he did. There was dog hair on it. Will wondered briefly if he should have had it dry cleaned before he returned it.

Hannibal was still on the upper level, still in the patient file writing something. Will wandered around the office, hands shoved in his pockets. He didn't know why it felt strange to be back here. It was almost as if it was a place he wasn't supposed to return to, a chapter that should have been closed behind barred doors.

His eyes fell to Hannibal's desk. It wasn't as neat as usual; it was covered in sketches, pencils, a notebook on a stack of… Will reached over and gently moved the notebook to the side. It was sitting on a stack of FBI files, in clearly marked folders. He glanced up to see if Hannibal's back was still turned. It was. He flipped the cover off of one of the folders and started reading it upside down. It was about the tableau found before he was found. It was about Abigail.

"Will," Hannibal spoke from right behind him. Will jumped, turning around and putting what distance between them he could by leaning against the desk. It was barely a few inches. "It's rude to go through peoples' things."

"Why do you have this?" Will asked, glancing up at Hannibal's face, his eyes. It was blank, searching. He looked down at his tie instead. It was paisley, crimson and white.

"Jack brought them to me," Hannibal answered, offering nothing else. "You shaved."

"I even used your favorite aftershave," Will replied. He waited for Hannibal to move but he just stood there, watching him. Risking another glance up, he caught his gaze. The man looked genuinely consumed with studying Will; it made him feel like prey. Frozen in place, unsure of whether or not he should flee.

The look was suddenly gone, replaced by a measured smile. Hannibal shifted, stepping to the side and holding his arm out to indicate for Will to move to his usual chair.

"When Jack brought me the files, we did speak about you. He told me you had an episode yesterday," he said as the two moved to their respective places. Hannibal unbuttoned his jacket and sat, legs crossed, leaning back, relaxed. Will sat up straight, hands on his knees, staring at the coat rack by the door.

"We're just jumping right in? No talking about me coming here and trying to take you out of state," he said with a huffed laugh. He didn't want to talk about that, but he wanted to talk about his panic attack even less.

"Would talking about it help you to feel more comfortable here?" Hannibal asked, unphased by the other's avoidance.

"No," Will admitted. "It wasn't an episode. I had a thought. I panicked."

"Where did you go when you panicked?" Another measured question. Will rolled his shoulders in a slow shrug. Hannibal had asked him where he went once before. It was the same place. Maybe he could tell him.

"Do you have a safe place that you go to?" Will looked at Hannibal. "If you get scared."

The man across from him smiled at him, amused at Will's assumption that he may not get scared. "I have a memory palace and often times I explore the rooms that bring me back to the places and times I found to have brought me pleasure."

"I'm not ill, Dr. Lecter," Will said quietly. "I never was."

"You were suffering from encephalitis," Hannibal corrected. "You may even still be having some effects, if any of the swelling is still present."

"Mentally," Will said.

"Are you afraid I will believe you to be mentally ill if you tell me where you go, Will?" Hannibal asked. Will felt his stomach drop and he tore his gaze away. He nodded. They sat in silence, waiting one another out. Hannibal, for Will to tell him his secret. Will, for Hannibal to ask something else.

After time dragged on too long, Hannibal stood, ever properly buttoning his suit jacket. Will tracked him as he walked across the room to his globe bar. Instead of pouring them drinks, Hannibal plucked up two glasses and an entire bottle of whiskey. He moved back over to Will and held out his hand that was holding the glasses. Will took one. Hannibal motioned for Will to follow and walked over to one of the couches. Unsure, he stood and followed, glass in hand.

Hannibal unbuttoned his jacket and sat once more. He patted the cushion next to him, almost comically. Will sat. Hannibal poured them drinks and tapped his glass to Will's in a silent toast. He drank. Will watched him.

"This isn't very professional," he said.

"I wasn't aware that conversations between friends were to remain professional at all times," Hannibal replied, sounding altogether too smug.

Will drank his whiskey in one quick gulp, savoring the burn. He held his glass out for more and Hannibal obliged. This time, Will only sipped. He relaxed, leaning against the back of the couch. He kept his focus across the room, his mind dancing between feeling as if he should not be in this man's office to remembering why he had come here so many days before. His desperation, his isolation. His pleas would remain unheard by every person who mattered, who could help. Hannibal had been his last chance.

"I knew who I was. I knew, despite it all. Despite getting too far into Hobbs' head. Despite the evidence, the infection in my brain," Will said, slowly and with full conviction, as if he had to convince both himself and Hannibal that he was speaking the truth. He huffed into his glass before taking another sip. "Do you know, Beverly is the only person who has said she could have believed me? Jack went so far as to tell me he needs *proof* that I'm on his side."

He expected Hannibal to ask a question. He would ask him if that made him feel a certain way or ask him why Jack would ask that of him in that lightly curious but methodical way that trained psychiatrists do. Instead, when he spoke again, his tone was more serious than it had been before. "Will you humor me a confession?"

“Sure,” Will said warily, caught off guard by the man’s question.

“After you were taken into custody, I honored your weekly appointment. I spent our hour exploring my memory palace, but for the first time in a very, very long time I found it to be lacking. I was mourning, unbeknownst to me at the time,” Hannibal said. He shifted on the couch, turning so he could fully face Will. “I felt relief when you returned here, however brief. I often find I wish you had chosen to stay.”

“I would have been arrested again,” Will stated bluntly.

“And then we would have proven your innocence through less extreme measures,” Hannibal assured him, then offered Will a smile when he glanced at him.

“I want to see the files.”

“You will,” Hannibal said.

“When?”

“When you tell me where you go.”

Will laughed. He should have expected that. He downed the last of his whiskey and held his glass out again. Hannibal poured another two fingers. He drank that down too. “When I was… When I was taken. *Gone.* I remember feeling like I was being held in a pool so that I was weightless. The … thing that held me, it spoke to me. I couldn’t understand what it was saying but it felt reassuring. Now that I’ve had time to think about it, I figure whatever drugs I was on just made me feel good.”

Hannibal considered what he said, watching him in that silent manner that made it seem as if he wasn’t even breathing. Will didn’t mind it as much this time; he didn’t have the prey feeling anymore. The other man reached over and took the glass from him, causing Will to realize that he had barely drank any of his own. Manipulative bastard got him drunk so he’d tell him where he thinks of going when he gets overwhelmed.

“Could it be you remember him speaking to you?” Hannibal asked as he stood, moving across the room once more to put the whiskey away. Will watched him, curious where the dirty glasses would end up. Hannibal was quick enough cleaning up that he still didn’t see.

“I guess. If you’re about to ask me if I could identify him that way, the answer is no,” he admitted. He laid his head back against the couch and looked up at the books on the second level. He should have found his patient file when he was there waiting for Hannibal and gone through it. “It wasn’t English. I don’t think it was any language. It was just a voice.”

“Your own?”

Will snorted out a laugh and shook his head ‘no.’ He dragged his gaze across the room, back to the coat rack. He sighed. “I didn’t dry clean your coat.”

“I don’t believe I asked you to,” Hannibal’s voice was closer again.

“It has dog hair on it,” Will argued, rolling his head to the side to find where Hannibal was. He was standing a respectable distance away, hands at his side. “Nothing you own has dog hair on it.”

“And everything you own does. Will, I would like you to tell me how you are doing.”

“I’m fine. They gave me my fishing gear back,” Will said.

“Will,” Hannibal’s tone was stern.

He could feel his cheeks turning pink, warmed from the alcohol running through his system. Will regretted not eating again before he came, although he hadn’t expected to drink. He expected to come, return the coat, talk about how he wanted to go back to work and how to convince another psychiatrist to clear him, then go home.

“I’m feeling drunk,” Will stated in an attempt to avoid the question.

“Yes. Drunk people are honest people,” Hannibal said, finally moving closer. He sat on the edge of the couch and just stared at Will, waiting patiently for his answer.

Will sighed and rubbed his face, then ran his hands through his hair. He laughed, if only to keep himself from crying. “He took my kidney, Hannibal. He took a trophy but he left me alive.”

“Do you fear he will take you again?”

“That’s what got to me yesterday,” Will said. It felt like a confession, like he’d done something wrong. “I was thinking about things going back to normal. Teaching, helping Jack, coming here, going home. Then I realized, the Ripper does sounders in threes. He’s done two. Two tableaus, three people. Two dead, one alive. It’s the only logical conclusion.”

Hannibal turned away. He stood but didn’t move from his spot. Will watched him. It was like he was making decisions then changing his mind in rapid fire succession. It made it feel even more like he’d done something wrong, now that what he said worried Hannibal enough to upset him. Finally, the man walked away. Will continued watching him as he made his way across the room to his desk. He sat up when he realized that Hannibal was going through the files Jack gave him. Hannibal pulled a single sheet of paper out of one of the folders, then returned to where Will sat. He held it out and Will took it from him. It was a photograph of his own tableau.

“What do you see, Will?”

Will looked at the photo before him, focusing mainly on his own image, his own body wrapped in cloth and posed as if he was simply standing by the water. It was surreal, but … but it was not angry. It wasn’t vindictive. He was dressed as if in a robe rather than a shroud, as if he’d stepped out of a Renassaince painting. Each curl of hair on his head seemed to frame his face perfectly, as if it had been washed and styled, topped with a crown of branches and flowers that cascaded down the right side of his head, the sick side. His skin was clean, the robe just as spotless. One hand held to his own heart, the other extended out towards the

other man posed along with him. The corpse almost mirrored him, one hand to where his heart should be, the other reaching up. No, not reaching, he was presenting. He held a heart in his hand, the flesh peeled away so that even from the distance that the photograph was taken, the heart was completely visible and identifiable.

He closed his eyes. He waited for the pendulum to swing, to put himself in the place of the Ripper.

“Will,” Hannibal spoke, his voice soft but urgent. Will opened his eyes and looked up at him, wondering why he’d been stopped. “Your worries are unfounded.”

His gaze fell back onto the picture. It was gruesome, but it was beautiful. A heart torn from the chest and presented as a gift. “Are you saying that he’s been pulling my pigtails on the playground?”

“Have you heard of the story of Beatrice and Dante?” Hannibal asked, reaching out to take the photograph from Will. Will reluctantly gave it up then shook his head. Hannibal looked at it, studying the image as if it were a piece of fine art. “It is a Florentine romance, Will. It is said they laid eyes upon each other at a well. It was love at first sight, but they could not overcome the differences of social classes. They could not truly be together. Despite this, she became his muse and his inspiration. She became an angel who guided him to Heaven through his poetry. This piece,” he gave the picture back to Will, “is reminiscent of *Dante e Beatrice,* a painting by Postiglione.”

Will ran his finger along the edge of the paper, feeling the light sting of a cut as he stared at it. “That’s a lot to unpack, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal hummed in agreement. “Perhaps when you’re sober.”

If Hannibal was right, that meant the Chesapeake Ripper wouldn’t be feeling love. It would be an obsession that he would mistakenly believe to be love. If Will was unable to figure out how to reciprocate in whatever way the Ripper had already decided was appropriate, he could feel scorned. An unpredictable, scorned intelligent psychopath who had already proven he had the ability to move through Will’s life undetected was not someone whose bad side he wanted to be on. It was someone whose bad side he *couldn’t* be on.

“Hannibal?” Will looked up at him, feeling unsure.

“Yes, Will?”

“I haven’t felt safe since I’ve been back,” he admitted.

Hannibal offered him a warm smile as he once again pulled the picture out of Will’s hand. He then strolled back to his desk, where he packed the FBI files into a briefcase. Will watched him, waiting for him to say something, to assure him that the police in his driveway would be enough protection if the Chesapeake Ripper chose to return to his home. If he felt the need to take him again. It would be a lie, but he’d welcome it. Instead, Hannibal returned to him and reached down to take hold of Will’s arm, encouraging him to stand. Will did, glad for the assistance between his incision and the room spinning from how much whiskey he drank so

quickly. “Come then. I’ll take you to my home. I have a guest room you can stay in, and we can discuss the crime scene in a place that is not my office.”

“When I’m sober,” Will muttered.

Hannibal led him across the room with a hand placed gently on his lower back, to the dreaded coat rack. It had fallen to the ground before the stag came, before he was enveloped in warmth. Hannibal had put a coat on already by the time Will realized he was being helped into the other coat, the one he’d brought to give back to Hannibal. The man pulled it around him, tucking it close to his neck before giving him another pleasant smile. He had forgotten how warm it was since he took it off days ago. Will smiled back then looked away, once again at Hannibal’s tie, focusing on the deep red within the pattern.

“My dogs,” he said softly and tried to fumble for his phone in his pants pocket. Hannibal hushed him.

“I will text Alana,” Hannibal assured, then they were on their way out to his car. Will gave in, allowing the other man to guide him, this time with his hand firmly set on his lower back. “Did you bring your medications?”

Will nodded and fished his keys out of his pocket for the other. “In my car.”

“Good boy,” was all Will got in response before he was shut into the Bentley. He pulled the coat tighter around himself and watched as Hannibal walked off to collect his medications. He would have to ask Hannibal what he should do to pass a real psychological evaluation; he wanted back on the case. Not to prove anything to Jack, not to show anyone that he forgave them for believing that he would kill. No. The Ripper had returned him alive. He not only returned him, but he did it in a display that would garner attention. That meant he returned him to Jack, to the FBI, and he put a public spotlight on him. He expected Will to return to work. He expected Will to accept his heart. Disappointing him could prove fatal

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BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; FRIDAY, 21:16

Hannibal pulled up along the curb in front of his house. The other man had either drifted off during the drive from his office or allowed himself to return to the safe place in his mind, which meant Hannibal had time enough to get out of the car and round the hood so he could open the door for him. He assisted Will in getting up out of the car as he was still unsteady on his feet; Hannibal may have plied him a bit too much, but it was nothing the man couldn't handle. They walked up the pathway to the steps together, Hannibal making sure to guide Will with a hand on his back, unable to resist gently brushing where he'd sliced into him days before. He left Will at the front door for a moment, leaning against the rail, as he returned to the Bentley to retrieve the suitcase and the medications.

"Have you eaten?" He asked, walking up the steps to unlock the door. Hannibal turned to Will, smiling warmly as dazed blue eyes caught his own. Inebriation seemed to make the empath more willing to look another in the eyes, or else he was aware Hannibal viewed it as a reward for certain behaviors and he was showing appreciation for the invitation to stay somewhere he had yet to feel vulnerable.

"Lunch," Will answered. Hannibal swung the front door open and helped Will step inside. He hung his own coat up, then proceeded to help Will out of his own. Despite the dog hair, it was hung as well.

"I will prepare you a simple dinner then. In the meantime, make yourself comfortable in the study," he said as he walked deeper into his home, motioning towards the study as he did. As Will passed him to enter the room he was shown, Hannibal handed off the case of files to him, then he stood waiting as the other took it over with him to sit in a chair. Once Will was settled, he made his way to the kitchen, where he had already prepared ingredients to make a classic Cuban sandwich, freshly hunted 'pork' already marinated and ready to sear in a pan, along with a side dish of fried yucca. Will had a simple palate and, while Hannibal preferred more compelx dishes, he was more than willing to make things that he knew the other would appreciate and enjoy without pomp. He also wasn't above admitting that when drunk, certain foods were simply better.

Hannibal shed his jacket and vest, leaving them folded over the back of a chair, then rolled his sleeves up to the elbow and donned an apron. He took his time, bringing oil to temperature to fry the yucca, browning the cut side of the roll in butter and oil in a skillet. He wanted to give Will enough time to decide to sift through the files on his own, to read witness statements, review evidence, look at photographs. One of the things Hannibal respected so deeply was how intelligent Will was, how easily he put pieces of puzzles together, how well he understood the dark side of those like himself. He was curious how quickly the profiler would put the scenes together, and how quickly he would start to realize that it was someone he personally knew.

What he was most curious to find out was who Will would begin to suspect first.

Once Will's dinner was complete, Hannibal plated it on a tray alongside a glass of water, two aspirin for an impending hangover, and his evening medications. He shed his apron but left himself casual, leaving the outer layers of his suit on the chair, and he made his way back to the study. As expected, surrounded with papers and photographs. What he hadn't expected was a fire built and lit in his fireplace with the man sprawled out on the floor in front of it. Will had made himself at home. Hannibal couldn't help but smile.

"I would have thought you'd have a gas fireplace," Will said without looking up. He had his glasses on, reading one of the reports. Hannibal lowered himself next to him and used one hand to clear a spot next to Will for his dinner. That got him a glance, Will looking up at him briefly before looking down at the tray. "A sandwich? *You* made a sandwich?"

"Yes," Hannibal said as he waited for Will to accept the meal.

The other put the paper he was reading down and pulled the tray closer to himself before picking up the sandwich to take a bite. He made a surprised, satisfied sound before taking another, then another. Hannibal's smile broadened, and he reached down and picked up the paper Will had been reading. It was a report by the Beverly Katz woman about what fibers were found on Abigail's body. The folder regarding Will's tableau was closed, covered by the wide open folder of the girl's.

"Where do you even get the wood from around here?" Will asked between bites.

"I own a rural property in Virginia for that purpose. I find a traditional fireplace is a pleasant way to keep my past in my present," Hannibal said, setting the paper down. He already knew what they found. Will laughed, but busied himself with finishing his food. "May I ask why that is amusing?"

With a shake of his head, Will replied, "I just can't imagine you going off into the forest to cut firewood."

"I have many sides, Will," Hannibal chided with no real animosity to his voice.

"I didn't have lumberjack on the list of expected sides," the other said with a smile of his own. He moved on from the finished sandwich to the yucca fries. Will paused briefly after the first one, as if he wasn't sure what was different about them, but he didn't question it. He didn't want to seem rude, Hannibal figured.

"Yucca. Healthier than potato and on theme with the style of sandwich," Hannibal offered. "Take your medications."

Will did, with no arguments. He finished off his food after and returned to the files, picking up the paper he'd been reading when Hannibal had interrupted him with dinner. "The thing I don't get is *why* he was committing the copycat murders. There are too many variables that would still fit within his known profile. Was he someone who knew Hobbs and he started off trying to give Hobbs away with Boyle's display? Was it some kind of punishment for authorities getting too close to him? If that's the case, Abigail's survival would have been bad for him if she had previously met him. That could explain why he'd taunt her with killing Schurr. It could have been a warning to her to stay silent. It could have just been for *fun*." He

paused, taking his glasses off to rub his eyes and sigh. “But none of that explains why he’d go after Sutcliffe or Madchen, unless he was specifically targeting *me* by that point. But why?”

“Perhaps he sees a potential in you,” Hannibal said after a few moments to consider his response, to consider how much he wanted to guide Will to an answer. “I notice you are not looking at the photographs.”

“I’m not,” Will admitted. He glanced at them, eyes trailing over the images quickly before he shoved his glasses back on and went back Katz’s report.

“May I ask why not?”

The empath shrugged a shoulder. Hannibal watched as he seemed to slump into himself, then he began stacking papers back together to put into the folder. Both of the folders were then returned to the briefcase. Finally Will looked up at him, but he withheld eye contact.

“I’m ... too drunk,” he lied, then looked away, to the fire. “Actually, no. You know what? I don’t want to imagine it. I don’t want to be in the mind of the man who took me right now.”

“That is understandable in your situation. Is there a particualr reason why not, Will?” Hannibal was curious. He had only known Will for a few short months, but in the time that they’ve known one another, he’s shown an almost self destructive determination to get into the mind of killers. Perhaps there was a limit to Will’s desires and seeing himself as a victim was a line he would not or could not cross.

“Because it wasn’t just fun for him. It wasn’t a game,” Will said, fully contradicting his previous musings. “He was waiting for me. Someone like me. It was a test and I passed with flying colors.”

They fell into silence as Hannibal watched him, studying the way the light from the fireplace danced across his features as he withdrew back into himself. Will was correct, of course. He was a bright man, brilliant. Boyle had been a test to see if Will would understand the differences, if he would see what he needed to in order to understand what Hobbs was. Will had passed. Will had shown how capable he was. He continued to every day after that, even through veils of denial and an illness that set his mind ablaze.

One day maybe he would confess to Will that he was not wrong about Schur; she was a warning to Abigail. But her fate had been decided by the girl herself when she spoke to her mother the way she had, and so publicly. Perhaps he would also explain to Will that Sutcliffe was unwilling to go along with his plans to let Will burn; perhaps one day he would admit to himself that it was not curiosity but self preservation that he himself wanted Will to burn. Madchen was merely in the wrong place at the wrong time. A victim of circumstance and another opportunity to solidify the image of Will Graham as a man incapable of separating himself from the murderers he becomes during investigations.

“Hannibal?” Will didn’t look over at him. Hannibal hummed a response and the other continued. “I was hallucinating when I left your office. It was… The thing I said held me? It was what took me. I remember it wrapping me in a shroud of skin and carrying me deep into

the woods, past where I could no longer see lights. It walked until we were submerged in a pool of blood, so dark it was almost black, where it held me and whispered to me. Where *he* held me and spoke to me."

As he spoke, Hannibal closed his eyes and imagined it; picking Will up and carrying him, not into his own basement, but through the woods outside of Will's home as the lights of his home drifted off into the distance. To his river, holding him to his body so the current wouldn't steal him away.

A laugh from the other brought him back into his study. A sad, bitter laugh.

"How fucked up is that?" Will asked as he rubbed his jaw, then hung his head down. Closing the world out. "The worst part is that I miss it."

"If the world created by your mind made more sense to you, then it is reasonable to miss being there," Hannibal said. He stood and gathered up the dinner tray. "Come."

At his simple command, Will stood up too. He was steadier now than he had been when they arrived; a combination of time and food in his stomach was sobering him up. Hannibal led him back to the kitchen where he motioned for Will to sit in one of the chairs by his island, which he did. After replacing his apron, Hannibal set to work cleaning dishes, pausing only briefly to give Will another glass of water. The man had drank his water then stood, rounding the island to stand near Hannibal as he washed, rinsed, and dried. He was returning the glass, but Hannibal could tell he was feeling like he was taking advantage, or unworthy of the care he was being shown. So, he made space for Will and handed him the dish towel for drying, and they fell into a rhythm of clearing out the sink with one another. Hannibal allowed himself to consider the future, of sharing his kitchen, his home with Will was something the other would let himself desire.

As they finished up and Hannibal began putting dishes away, he turned his attention fully back to the man standing by his sink. "You wish to feel safe."

Will furrowed his brows at him and slowly nodded, "Don't we all?"

"Why do you feel your home is not safe?"

The man huffed and leaned back against the counter, crossing his arms over himself, much in the way that Jack had demonstrated during their talk about Will. Hannibal finished putting his things away and shed his apron, before walking back over to stand in front of the other. Waiting.

"It's been violated," Will said eventually. He had chosen a prudent word.

"Between the Chesapeake Ripper being within the walls and the FBI turning out every drawer, I would imagine 'violated' is a generously inadequate word," Hannibal pointed out. He watched as Will tensed up and flicked his eyes up at him before looking away again.

"I think about my dogs," Will's voice was cold, "and how often he entered my home without me there to get them used to him. So they wouldn't bark when he came. So they wouldn't

alert me."

"You believe he was in your home when you were?"

Will made eye contact, his own dark and flat, as if he were mimicking a man incapable of feeling. As if he were remembering Hannibal's own expression. "He force-fed me Abigail's ear in my own home. I was *home*, Hannibal. I can remember … pieces. Flashes."

"Could your dogs' inability to alert you to his presence have an effect on your lack of feeling safe?" Hannibal asked, guiding Will away from the memories, back to the present.

He nodded. Will sunk back and took his eye contact away, but he couldn't hide how fearful he was. How perfectly unsure he was of his entire world around him. Before Hannibal stood a man whose job has been taken from him, his only purpose stripped away, and he was not sure when he would get it back. Will was a man whose coworkers never fully trusted him, their suspicions of him unable to be shaken even with proof of his innocence. He was a man whose only friends had called him a murderer. People he thought he had connections with showed real, true fear towards him and he was incapable of blocking their fear out, incapable of not feeling the fear himself. He was a man who couldn't separate himself from the dark actions of others, who rejected his surrogate daughter when he realized she too was damaged, only to send her into the arms of her killer because he couldn't even trust himself.

Will was man whose dogs wouldn't even bark at a killer who had hurt him.

Hannibal smiled at Will.

"We can work on reestablishing a sense of safety," he reassured. "In the meantime, you should rest."

There was not much more Hannibal wanted to push for the night. He moved away from the other, to gather up his jacket and vest, then patiently waited for Will to follow him out of the kitchen and up the stairs. Hannibal led him to the guest room, entering it and making a point not to look at the man, to allow him in his own time to look around and take in the room, to come to terms with the comforts he was being offered so freely in his own time. He made his way into the walk-in closet, returning with a set of pajamas that would fit the other as well as a robe. Will was standing in the middle of the room, hands shoved into his pockets, head turned towards the window, blocking the room out. He was unsure. Unsure or not, his car was at Hannibal's office. Making a fuss enough to get a cab was not something Will would be willing to do, not if it meant going back to his home in Wolf Trap where he would feel isolated and insecure.

"Here," Hannibal said, getting his attention. He held the items out to Will, who carefully took them. "There is a tub in the bathroom. If it is helpful, take a bath. I will see you in the morning."

"Thank you," Will muttered. "For dinner, too. Thank you. But this is a bit much."

"Will," he stepped closer, leaning down enough to catch Will's eyes, to force him to look at him. He gave the empath a soft, tender look and reached up to cup the back of his neck in his

grasp, just firmly enough for it to be a comforting touch that Will could escape if he felt the need to. “You are dear to me. Providing a place of comfort for you is the least I can offer.”

His only response was a searching look on Will’s face before he gave Hannibal a half smile and a nod of acceptance. Hannibal sidestepped and allowed the other to walk around him and head towards the bathroom. After Will shut himself behind the door, Hannibal stood, perfectly still, until he heard the sound of running water in the tub. He imagined Will would let himself drift off into the arms of the stag man he spoke of, weightless and warm as he floated in a pool of water. If he were to pull the correct strings, fate would allow him to be the one to comfort Will in his moments of need. It would no longer be a hallucination, but his own body of flesh and bone, something tangible that would satisfy a need no one else would, or even could, fulfill. Something Will would mourn each time they parted.

The water turned off. Hannibal turned and left the room, quietly latching the door so that Will would not hear that he’d been waiting.

puram

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 07:38

Monday morning rolled around more quickly than either Will or Hannibal wanted. Will had decided that rest and recovery was actually a necessity for his body, after a Saturday morning was spent being politely browbeaten by a former surgeon overusing medical terminology and psychiatry to wear him down. Hannibal delighted in having Will as his guest all weekend; he spent the two days feeding him, discussing subjects not often brought up during therapy sessions or at crime scenes, and encouraging Will to help him in preparing the menu for his upcoming dinner party. The doctor side of him spent the time making sure medications were taken on schedule and plenty of naps and a proper bedtime were kept. Sunday evening, Will had pressed Hannibal for how to pass his psychological evaluation, and Hannibal had been neither helpful nor harmful in his advice. He repeatedly told Will that whether or not he was cleared was up to the psychiatrist chosen by the FBI.

After Hannibal made them breakfast and they cleaned up together, they got in the car and returned to his office. He had patients and Will had dogs waiting at home that Alana most likely was tired of watching. He missed them anyway and he still had to finish putting his house back together. The Bentley was pulled into Hannibal's usual parking spot, they got out, and Hannibal made sure to hand off the briefcase to Will that had the case files, and his medications, within.

"Thanks," Will said. He started to turn away, then stopped himself and looked up at Hannibal. He had let him stay in his guest room all weekend and he should show more gratitude, he told himself. "For uh, this. Whole thing."

Hannibal was amused, his eyes lighting up in a way that told Will he was getting something he wanted, even if trivial. The man smiled at him and Will smiled back then looked away, towards where his own car was parked. Staying over all weekend had been easy. He wasn't sure why thanking him for it was making him anxious. It would have been easier to just say bye, to just assume Hannibal knew he appreciated it and it didn't need to be talked about.

"I should be thanking you, Will. It's not often I find such easy friendship," Hannibal's voice spoke with the same amusement his eyes sparkled with.

"I've taken up enough of your time. Go tend to your patients, Dr. Lecter," Will huffed, but he gave the man once last smile before he started heading back to his car. He could feel Hannibal watching him as he walked off, and he could tell he hadn't moved to go inside yet.

"Will. Don't hesitate to call if you need me," Hannibal called out. Will turned around and waved, a sort of half acknowledgement, half goodbye. That satisfied Hannibal enough that he began walking towards his office, so Will turned back around and picked up his pace to get to his car. He fumbled for his keys, checking the pockets of the coat he was still borrowing

before he found them--a brief thought of going in and swapping the coat out for his own jacket crossed his mind, but he didn't act on it--then his phone rang.

Will pulled his phone out and checked the caller ID. It was Jack. He answered and put the phone between his ear and shoulder so that he could unlock his car and get in while he talked.

"Hey Jack."

"Will. Your eval has been scheduled. It's today. I would have told you sooner but he worked you into his schedule last minute," Jack began immediately. "I'll text you the address and time."

With a sigh, Will threw himself into the drivers' seat and set the briefcase down on the passenger seat. "Okay. I'm in Baltimore right now so depending on the time--"

"Perfect. Stay there. Did you have time to review the case files?"

"Yeah," he said, looking down at the briefcase beside him.

"What do you think?" Jack asked, always in work mode. Will rubbed his forehead, a dull headache making itself known for the first time in days.

"I think I need time, Jack," Will snapped.

The line was silent except for the soft sound of someone breathing in the background. Jack must be at home, as early as it was, still in bed next to a sleeping Bella. He didn't say anything long enough that Will started to regret what he'd said, but he meant it. He hadn't worked up enough nerve yet to look at his own case file, his own tableau, not any closer than he had in his therapy conversation with Hannibal.

"Okay," his stern voice broke through eventually. "Get your eval done. Don't fight with him. It's just a standard evaluation to make sure you're ready to go back to consulting. Nothing else."

"Yeah," Will agreed. "I'll be on my best behavior."

"Good. I'll text you," Jack said, then the line went dead. Will tossed his phone onto his passenger seat and laid his head back on the headrest. His phone buzzed with the text. He'd look at it in a few minutes.

Will wanted to go home, but he also didn't. Home meant putting the house back together, waving at the cops in his driveway every time he went outside with the dogs, remembering how violated he felt there. He wanted to go to work, but he didn't want to work on his own case. He wanted something new to happen, some distraction, some other crime not related to him or the Chesapeake Ripper. Something that would make things go back to normal. He wanted to go into his classroom and lecture, to talk about cases that came before, cases that were solved. He wanted to lay in Hannibal's guest bedroom staring at the way too tall ceiling while he pretended nothing else existed except the soft sheets and the smell of coffee wafting up from the kitchen.

A flash of light caught his eye. Will scanned the other cars parked along the street, the sidewalk, the line of buildings until he saw it--until he saw *her*. Freddie Lounds was leaning against her car, parked down the road, looking down at a camera in her hands. It had a scope on it. She had taken his picture.

He got out of his car and walked towards her. She noticed him and made to get into her own vehicle so he sped up, jogging across the road.

“What the hell are you doing?” He yelled out once he was closer.

“Street photography,” she lied, swinging her car door open.

He made it to her and pushed the door shut. Freddie took a few steps backwards, almost fearful, but most likely to keep him from trying to take her camera from her.

“Why are you following me?” Will asked, anger in his voice.

“Because you’re dangerous and I seem to be the only person who can see it,” she shot back, conviction in her own voice.

“I am a victim,” he said firmly, trying to keep anger in his voice, trying not to show her how it affected him.

“Or an accomplice. Who else would survive the Chesapeake Ripper?” Freddie stepped around her car, making sure to face Will while she did. She was being overly cautious. He laughed; she really did believe the shit she wrote.

“Miriam Lass,” Will said. “You know her amputation was done while she was alive.”

“He still has her. He still has time to kill her. He still has time to let you kill her,” Freddie pulled her passenger car door open and set her camera inside on the seat. She fished her purse out and made a show of pulling out pepper spray, before shutting the door and leaning against the roof. Her hand that held the pepper spray stayed in Will’s line of sight. He rolled his eyes at her. “And now you’re fucking your psychiatrist so he writes a glowing review of how stable you are, right? So he’ll say that your convenient bout of encephalitis explains all your weird behavior and it’s all cured?”

The implication that he could be manipulating Hannibal with sex made Will see red, made him imagine taking a handful of her red hair and smashing her head into the windshield of her car. Again and again until the glass was nothing but spiderwebs of broken shards. Instead, Will stepped closer to her, leaning against the drivers’ side of the car. She stood her ground, now that she had pepper spray to hide behind.

“If I were you, I’d be careful what you write in your little blog. The Chesapeake Ripper isn’t done with his current sounder,” Will said quietly, fully intending to scare her, to make her second guess whatever she was going to publish about him. He turned then and shoved his hands into his pockets, walking back towards his car. He didn’t care what her response would be. He didn’t care that he’d just threatened her. She was going to write what she wanted to

write and stir up whatever suspicions she thought would get her ad revenue. Ad revenue and attention.

“Are you going to ask your mentor to target me, Will?” She called out. He ignored her. He had to ignore her, to shut her out.

Will made it back to his car and got in, slamming the door harder than it deserved. He let out a deep breath, rubbed his face, and then screamed into his hands. Hannibal was his one steady support in all of this, the only person not second guessing his motivations or involvement, and he was going to read an article accusing Will of using him. He screamed again, this time without hiding his face.

Once he was done screaming, he laid his forehead on the steering wheel and took some deep breaths. Will pulled his coat tight around himself and imagined that the stag man was with him, horns scraping the roof of the car as it leaned forward from the back seat to wrap its cold, black arms around him. It would whisper to him, calming words in a language unable to be translated, until everything was okay again. It would know what needed to be done. It knew how to keep bad things from happening.

His phone buzzed again. Will opened his eyes. Lounds’ car was gone but otherwise, the street was the same. It was chilly in his car. He put the key in the ignition and turned it on, then picked his phone up. The first text was from Jack, an address and a time. The second was from Alana; it was a picture of his dogs all eating their breakfast. He smiled at the sight of them and typed out a quick ‘thank you’ text and let her know he’d be home that night so she didn’t need to stop by again. He went back to Jack’s text and typed in the address into his GPS. It wasn’t for a few more hours but he figured he might as well see how far of a drive it would be. In the meantime, he could run by the store and pick up some extra locks to add to his doors and windows.

BALTIMORE STATE HOSPITAL FOR THE CRIMINALLY INSANE; MONDAY, 11:45

“Dr. Gideon,” Chilton greeted as he limped his way to the chair stationed in front of the cage that held his prisoner. He made a show of using his cane to support his weight as he lowered himself into the chair, making sure to maintain eye contact with Gideon as he did. He was not above reminding the man of his misgivings in every way necessary. “I know you are enjoying your game, but if you have information that could help capture our area’s most prolific serial killer, then you have a duty to your fellow man to disclose.”

“I don’t think I do, Dr. Chilton,” Gideon’s response was full of disdain, but it was not real; he was enjoying the fact that Chilton had to finally come speak to him, even if Gideon himself wasn’t thrilled about it. “My fellow man has cast me aside. Why would I grovel for scraps of acceptance?”

“Perks are often incentive enough. Imagine it,” Chilton chuckled, tapping his cane on the ground. “Instead of a musty old brick cell in the basement of our beloved hospital here, you could be moved to a new building. One where you could have a window. Wouldn’t you love a view?”

“The only question I have now is, is a view worth my life?” The prisoner sighed and leaned back against the bars of the cage he sat in. His gaze drifted from Chilton, to the guards across the room, to the attending that had let the director in. He smiled at him. “You know. I would ask him myself, but,” he held his hands up and rattled the chains of the cuffs holding them together, “I’m at a bit of a disadvantage. Perhaps I could send a friend with my inquiry.”

“Gideon,” Chilton was no longer amused. He frowned and stood, taking his time, making a mental note to get himself a better chair for these visits. “You’re a smart man. You of all people should know that he can’t get you in here. Besides, he’ll be arrested.”

“No, see. There’s where you’re wrong. He won’t be,” Gideon said. He stood also, mirroring Chilton, and he grasped the bars. He leaned his forehead against the cage and laughed. “Men of our standing? We don’t get caught unless we allow ourselves to get sloppy. I don’t imagine he’s capable of that.”

“’Men of our standing?’” Chilton repeated, curious.

Gideon feigned surprise, “Why of course, *Doctor* Chilton. He is a surgeon, isn’t he? Capable of amputations and expert organ removal. A man who can move about polite society, hosting parties to rub elbows with the best of the best, when only hours before, his elbows were deep in the viscera of a living person.”

Chilton turned away from him at the mention of organ removal. He frowned deeply and began making his way across the room to leave. He was done with Gideon’s teasing. “Enjoy your last visit to this room, Dr. Gideon. Since you won’t give a name, you won’t be humored with these games. I have more important business to tend to.”

From his cage, Gideon watched as Chilton limped up the steps. The attending followed him, shooting the caged man an apologetic look before jogging up the stairs behind his boss. Gideon stepped back from the bars and turned his attention back to the guards that were still in the room, waiting to return him to his cell. He had no intentions of disclosing the Ripper’s identity, but the squirrely attending was dead set on it. Whatever the reason was, Gideon hadn’t asked. He assumed the kid wanted more prisoners that were once what he considered powerful, so he could hold his own power over them within these walls. Not the most noble of actions, but could he really fault the boy for navigating his desires within the law? Either way, the kid had to know who the guilty party was. If he hadn’t figured it out, he was dumber than Gideon thought. If he had though, Gideon had no doubts that his little ‘send a friend’ line might get the kid out of his hair, keep him from initiating conversations between him and Chilton. If the kid approached the Ripper, it would be the last thing he did.

The guards commanded him to stand back while they unlocked his cage. He lifted his cuffed hands in the air, splaying his fingers and making an overly innocent face to show he’d cooperate. The door swung open and he stood, patiently waiting for one of them to get mad that he didn’t step out because they didn’t instruct him to. Instead, one grabbed him by the chain attaching his handcuffs to his waist and pulled him out.

“No need to be rough boys, I’m ready and willing,” he chided as he stumbled out of the cage. They led him across the room in the opposite direction, to the stairwell that took them down, down, down into the basement. Gideon stole a few glances out of the windows on the way to

the stairs, walking slow enough to piss the guards off but not enough that they could claim he wasn't cooperating. One of the guards pushed him through the doorway once they made it. "All your coiled resentment. So bad for the digestion."

The door was shut, latched, and they began their slow descent. Gideon looked down over the balcony at the cage below, peeking at which staff might be in there that evening, before continuing to tease. "Was that poor Nurse Shell I murdered a good-time girl with a beer or two inside her? Or a loved sister with a smile for you all? Maybe it was those eyes… She had such beautiful eyes."

He paused and chuckled, stepping slowly as the guards tried leading him quicker down the steps.

"It's why I had to take them."

"Shouldn't've struggled, Dr. Gideon," one of the guards said.

Gideon wouldn't tell be able to tell anyone much about what happened after the first crack of a bully stick across his head, but he did remember the sense of falling. The last thing he could recall was the sound of metal being struck by something big and fleshy, followed by blinding pain before everything went black.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 14:00

Will pulled off the main road into a neighborhood. He looked around at all the too modern for the area McMansions, hoping this was just a cut through street. The idea of walking up to some rich psychiatrist's house and being welcomed in only to be placed in a formal sitting room and picked apart made him feel uneasy. It would be better if it in was some sterile room with cheap tile and a flickering fluorescent light. There would be an old guy wearing a cheap suit sitting across a pressed wood, wobbly table. They would both want to get the whole thing over with as quickly as possible. Will would smile, nod, lie, and claim he wasn't sure if he was ready but he really wanted to get back to helping Jack and the team.

Instead, his GPS announced that he arrived at his destination right in front of one of the too large houses.

He pulled to the curb and checked the street. The only other vehicle parked on the street was a lawn care company. Carefully, and mostly to avoid unwanted attention by the psychiatrist's neighbors, he pulled into the driveway and parked about halfway up. Not too close to block any of the garage doors, not too far from the road if he wanted to leave quickly. He checked himself in his visor mirror; he looked fine, he didn't know why he was checking. Hannibal's shampoo was fancy and whatever it had in it made his curls less unruly than normal. He'd slept well so he didn't have bags under his eyes. He had eaten regularly over the last few days. He even had a lot less dog hair on him since Hannibal had been adamant about laundering his clothes for him so he would feel fresh for the day. Still, he shoved his glasses on as a shield and got out of the car.

The walk up the pathway and steps was no less anxiety inducing than parking, but he forced himself to just do it. He was prepared to be gracious, to make eye contact, to be pleasant. He rang the doorbell and took a polite step back. He didn't shove his hands in his pockets and turn away, instead facing the door with a neutral look on his face. Hopefully within the hour, he'd be back in his car and on the way home to Wolf Trap.

The door swung open and a familiar face smiled broadly at him. "Ah, Mr. Will Graham. Right on time for your appointment."

It was Frederick Chilton.

Will resisted visibly deflating and he managed to plaster on a fake smile that he hoped didn't look as fake as it felt. "Dr. Chilton. Jack didn't tell me who I was meeting."

"Yes, well, I suppose it doesn't matter who is doing it when it's required to be done. Come in," the man said as he stepped to the side, his cane tapping on the expensive tile flooring of his entryway. Will entered and decidedly did not take his coat off. He was not going to stay the entire hour. If he failed, he failed. He'd go back to teaching once they let him and he would become a shut in until the FBI caught the Ripper. "Follow me."

They made their way down a hall--a broad, white, sterile hall--and into a room one could call a study, but it looked more like a doctor's office. Most things in Chilton's home that Will could see were whites and neutrals, all too modern, and distinctly lacking any real personality. He must have hired an interior designer and he was too afraid to change anything lest each room didn't look like it belonged on a magazine cover. This room was no different, with a metal and glass desk and matching bookshelves that displayed a tasteful amount of medical books and tchotchkes. The walls were a tasteful offwhite, built in blinds shaded the floor to ceiling windows, and a neutral rug with an inoffensive design covered most of the open area. Will threw himself down into a squared off, leather and metal chair. It was uncomfortable.

"Yes, have a seat," Chilton said as changed directions from heading towards his desk, to the chair set cattycorner to the one Will sat in. He lowered himself carefully, then rested his cane against the chair and leaned back. Will could tell he was realizing how uncomfortable his chairs were. Will smiled at him.

"So how does this go?" Will asked, trying desperately to keep any negative emotions out of his voice. He knew how regular psych evals went. He did not know what Chilton would want in return for passing him.

"I'm sure you've done these before, Mr. Graham," Chilton said with a smile.

"Yes… But not normally with a man who was accused of persuasion that resulted in his own kidnapping and dismemberment," Will said flatly. He knew it was the wrong thing to say. The look on Chilton's face confirmed that it was. Will looked away, at one of the bookshelves and he began reading the titles.

"Accusation does not always align with reality. You of all people should understand that," he said, trying to sound measured but Will heard the exasperation. Will just nodded in response.

He could understand that, but Gideon's actions leading up to and during his escape were more than damning for Chilton as far as he was concerned. Silence stretched on as Will refused to give in and Chilton sat thinking. Finally, he spoke again. "I have a proposition. A deal, if you're interested."

Will flicked his gaze back over at the other, checking his face, seeing the desperation. "I'm listening."

"If you allow me to study you for a paper I'm writing, I will give you the most glowing review possible," Chilton said and Will opened his mouth to talk, but he raised his hand. "And I know. I know you don't want to be studied. You don't want to be a *case study* to be put on display. I won't name you."

"And you expect it to be accurate? Peer reviewed?" Will huffed.

"Yes. You aren't the only person to have an empathy disorder, Mr. Graham. I have other candidates to interview."

"Three sessions," Will offered after a moment of consideration, his tone firm.

"Five."

"Two."

Chilton chuckled and waved his hand. "Alright. Three sessions to study you. You will be honest with me and no topics will be off limits. For that, I'll send Jack Crawford a well written evaluation stating that you are showing a remarkable level of resilience and it would be beneficial not only to you but to the FBI to have you back as a consultant."

Will stood. He closed the space between them and held his hand out. Chilton looked at it for a minute, then smiled brightly up at him and grasped his hand to shake. Will squeezed too hard before releasing. "Deal. But no sessions if Jack doesn't allow me back."

"He will," Chilton said with confidence. Will knew Jack would have him back as soon as possible. Chilton and Will both knew Jack wanted nothing more than to have any help he could to catch the Chesapeake Ripper. With the right psych eval, whoever above Jack that was making him follow protocol would relent and consider Will safe to return to duty.

"Are we done?" Will asked, staring down at the man.

"We've barely spoken," Chilton began to argue; he wanted Will to stay, to actually answer questions.

"I pass whether or not I stay, right?"

"Well, yes," the man slumped his shoulders, knowing there was no point. If he argued, Will could take back his side of the deal. Will would most likely appeal for someone else, someone without any connection to the Chesapeake Ripper or his imitation. Chilton stood. Will backed up, giving him space. "Congratulations, Mr. Graham. You're of sound mind. Let me show you out."

“Thank you, Dr. Chilton,” Will said, once again plastering on a fake smile. He did not care how fake it seemed this time.

They walked back through the soulless home, Will no longer interested in looking in any of the rooms off of the hall. At the door, Chilton tried to block him to speak again, but Will stepped around him and let himself out. He stopped at the edge of the stoop and turned to look at the man, who looked offended but defeated.

“Thanks,” he muttered, then turned and jogged down the steps.

“It was my pleasure, Mr. Graham. I’ll see you soon,” the man called out.

Will waved a hand over his shoulder. He got back to his car and got inside. Chilton was still standing in his doorway, the defeat gone. He looked smug now, as if he’d won. It made Will angry, but at least he didn’t have to sit there for an hour and lie to some stranger who would try to get him to admit to things he himself didn’t want to face. He turned the car on. The clock showed that he was only in there for a grand total of eighteen minutes. Good. He backed out of the driveway and started towards home. He had better things to do today. He had locks to install.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again everyone for all the comments. ♥
Chapter updates will probably start getting more sporadic instead of every day. I've been too busy to write at work and I'm no longer 3 chapters ahead of what I've been posting. I will try to catch up this weekend though.

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BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 09:45

Monday had passed by in a haze. Each patient bored Hannibal more than the last. He found himself counting minutes down as if he were a young man stuck in a class he had no interest in. The relief he felt when the last patient left his office was almost physical, but the realization that he would go home to an empty kitchen had only caused his irritation to return with a vengeance. To avoid a long night on his own, he chose to invite Alana over for conversation and dinner, mostly to gauge her feelings about Will now that he was proven innocent. Hannibal had yet to have a one-on-one with her and the last time they saw one another was in Jack Crawford's office.

He found their usual banter lacking. Her normal subtle flirting was no longer endearing. The evening had been dull but manageable. She at least filled a few lonely hours.

Once Tuesday morning came around, Hannibal returned to his office. He saw his first patient. Then, unable to resist any longer, he gave in and checked his phone. No texts, no missed calls. That meant Will must be doing well, and he decided that was both a disappointment and a good thing. He pulled his tablet out and checked the news. There was nothing of interest, so he switched over to Tattlecrime. If he were to hear nothing else until this evening's appointment, Miss Lounds was still convinced Will was a murderer and she was not shy about using him for click bait. Hannibal had high hopes that she was aware of his comings and goings over the weekend, and he was particularly interested in her take on his long visit.

As anticipated, her top article was about Will. The big, bold, red title screamed *Will Graham: Starved for Affection or Master of Manipulation?* against a glaring white background. Beneath the title stood a black and white photograph of both Will and himself, standing on the stoop of his home. Will was clearly inebriated, smiling up at him, and his own hand was laid firmly on the drunk man's waist.

Hannibal committed the scene to memory. It would be a lovely piece to recreate with his own talents.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation's sweetheart profiler has found a new interest: his very own therapist.

The first line read like pure tabloid trash. Hannibal smiled to himself, imaging the bitter reaction Will would have to it. He read on:

I did a deep dive into Dr. Hannibal Lecter once I found out that the FBI was outsourcing their psychological evaluation of Graham to a specialist. In my article titled The Man who can Tame Will Graham, *I highlighted many of his accomplishments, from his days studying at Johns Hopkins, to his surgical career, to his current position as one of Baltimore's most esteemed psychiatrists. Click the link to read more about Dr. Lecter in detail, but for the purpose of this article I will remind you that he had previously published works regarding*

social exclusion and whether or not it is an evolutionary advantage. He mused whether the advantage went to the individual excluded or to groups who cast the individuals out. It was well written, well researched, and he argued his point well. In other words, Dr. Lecter seemed like the best man for the job.

At the time of that article's publishing, we knew Will Graham to be an ex-cop who failed to become an FBI agent because of his inability, or rather, his downright refusal to be properly vetted. Because of this, he began a modest career in teaching at the FBI Academy, which lead to an interest in him as a consultant for the Behavioral Analysis Unit. His entire known social life was one of solitude; I struggled to find even a single person who could describe Graham as more than a coworker or acquaintance. Was Graham excluded by them purposefully? Or had he chosen to step back from society on his own in an attempt to hide his true nature?

All we had here at Tattlecrime were theories, so the fact that a renowned psychiatrist who had a special interest in social pariahs became involved in his life seemed like it would be beneficial. However, over the course of the last several months, it was proven time and time again that Graham was incapable of benefitting from therapy, which culminated in his own arrest for the Copycat Killings.

Now that Graham has been given a second chance thanks to none other than the Chesapeake Ripper himself, he seems to be determined to continue his manipulation of those around him. Most people in his life I'm sure feel bad for him for his 'false' arrest, for the conveniently timed 'encephalitis,' and for being a 'victim' of the Ripper. It would be easy for Graham to slip back into the role of a shy professor who moonlights as a Special Agent who wants nothing more than to stop killers. But to fool a man used to dealing with pathological liars, sociopaths, and every flavor of psychopath? Well, Will Graham had to find an alternative route: Will Graham decided to use his body.

Hannibal was unable to continue reading. He reread the last line several times, the hand he was resting his chin on clenching into a fist involuntarily no matter how many times he reminded himself to relax it. Miss Lounds was by no means a dull woman, but her obsession with proving Will to be a bad man was making her blind. Yes, he knew that her writing about them would be scandalous. He knew that it would seem unprofessional of him to initiate what appeared to be a relationship with someone many viewed as a patient of his. But the article should be pointing the finger of blame at him, not at Will. Hannibal had expected her to write a short piece about seeing them leave his office, Will drunk, and then seeing them return to his office days later, so that she could speculate about a blooming relationship, inappropriate as it was. It was meant to be a tool to drive a wedge between Jack and Will, for Will to be forced to pick a side. He was glad then that Will did not read Tattlecrime.

He shut the tablet down and placed it into its drawer. There was no point in finishing the article unless he decided that discussing it with Miss Lounds herself would be an appropriate course of action. Instead of reading to fill his time until his next appointment, Hannibal chose to sketch the image of Will smiling up at him. If nothing else, at least her article gave him that.

As he was pulling his materials out of his desk, his cell phone began to vibrate as a call came in. He paused what he was doing and looked at it, curious as to who would call him during

known business hours. He picked it up to look at the caller ID. It was Jack Crawford. Perhaps he had seen the article and wanted to clarify his relationship with Will. He answered.

“Hello, Jack. Your call is a pleasant but welcome surprise,” Hannibal said smoothly.

“Good morning. I’m sorry to bother you at this hour, but we have a situation,” Jack sounded like he was in work mode. Hannibal could hear background noise that indicated that he was on bluetooth and the man was driving. “Several bodies have been found in a river. I’m on the way now. So is Will.”

“Will passed his psychological evaluation?” Hannibal asked. Will had not told him. He hadn’t expected it so soon. This was not what he had been expecting to discuss.

“Yeah. He did well enough I’m surprised Chilton didn’t throw a gold star sticker on the damn thing,” Jack said with a short laugh, as if he himself hadn’t believed the result.

Hannibal frowned at the mention of Frederick Chilton, but he would question Will about it later. Or perhaps he would go directly to Chilton. Instead, he replied with a pleasant, if not slightly clipped, “That’s wonderful news.”

“Yep. Will’s a capable man,” Jack said, but Hannibal could hear the hesitation in his voice.

“Yes, he is,” Hannibal filled the silence, waiting for Jack to continue.

“But,” he sounded more hesitant than before, “Will’s been through a lot. Didn’t seem like he wanted to look at case files, and now he’s saying he’s fine walking into an active crime scene with several bodies. Do *you* think he’s ready?”

Hannibal didn’t respond immediately, mulling over his answer. Will could claim he was ready, could even believe it, and still the symptoms of his trauma would dictate his reactions. If Will was not ready, if he could not prove to Jack his usefulness, he would be cast aside. Suspicions would rear their ugly heads. Will would lose his self-described purpose. If Will truly could handle it, he would begin to reclaim his position within his social circle, once again accepted, welcomed for his gifts as long as they were beneficial to the group. The latter would be a more difficult path for Hannibal to navigate, but Will returning to the field was not currently within his realm of control.

“Whether or not I believe Will is ready, he has passed his psychological evaluation and he has emphatically stated that he is prepared to return to consultation under your watchful eye,” Hannibal said, knowing it was a non-answer. He wondered if Jack had chosen Chilton personally or if the order had come down from above. Considering the man was calling Hannibal to reassure himself that the right decision had been made meant Jack most likely had made the decision. It seemed a riskier move than asking Alana or even himself; Chilton was already under suspicions for his actions regarding Abel Gideon’s planted delusions of grandeur, of being capable enough to be the Chesapeake Ripper.

“He seems more ready than he was when he was sick,” Jack said, finality in his voice. Will’s fate was sealed.

“Will has made remarkable improvements now that he is getting the proper medical care,” Hannibal agreed. He looked at the clock and frowned. His next patient was due soon. “Jack, I don’t wish to be rude--”

“Oh! Of course, Dr. Lecter,” Jack cut him off. “I don’t mean to keep you. You’re probably at work.”

“Yes. Thank you, Jack,” Hannibal kept a pleasant, friendly tone, despite the interruption. “I will ask after Will this evening.”

“Thank you. Goodbye, Dr. Lecter,” Jack said. Hannibal did not grace him with his own farewell before hanging up the phone. He stared at the blank screen of the device for a moment before deciding to turn the volume on; if Will was not ready to put himself into the mind of a killer, he may have another panic attack. He may need Hannibal, and he didn’t want to miss it even if he were with a patient. Most people knew him well enough to respect his office hours. He had no worries any other callers would interrupt.

Hannibal placed his sketching materials back in their desk drawers, then he stood and buttoned his suit jacket. His next patient would be there to provide him a distraction, another hour counted down until Will would arrive for this evening’s appointment.

ROCKVILLE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 13:42

Will stood next to Jack, staring at the scene before them. They were on a bridge overlooking a short, concrete dam. Behind them and below there was a flurry of agents and lab techs pulling bodies out of the water, bringing them up the hill, and lining them up for inventory. There were three already laid out on body bags, a fourth in the process of being pulled from the water. Zeller and Price were in waders, waist deep in the water below. Bickering, or as they would describe it, bantering. Neither had acknowledged Will’s presence yet--he knew Zeller still harbored doubts, and Price wasn’t willing to get in the middle of any real, heated bickering. Jack laid a hand on Will’s shoulder. He shrugged it off but turned his head towards him to acknowledge that the man wanted his attention.

“It’s nice to have you back,” Jack sounded almost sincere. “I called Dr. Lecter.”

“My keeper?” Will asked, turning his attention back to the water. This was not a crime scene. This was a dumping ground.

“Your anchor,” he countered, voice firm. “He wouldn’t give me a straight answer, so I’ll ask you again: are you sure you’re ready?”

The profiler shoved his hands into his pockets, watching as a fourth body was hoisted from the water and placed on a metal gurney. Techs immediately began moving it up the hill to the bridge, to line it up neatly with the rest.

“Won’t know until we try, right?” Will huffed out.

“Hey,” Bev’s voice cut into their conversation. She had that damned tone to her voice again--caring, soft, as if she’d scare Will off like a frightened puppy if she said the wrong thing or moved too quickly. He smiled at her. “Glad to see you back.”

“Not sure if it’s nice to be back or not,” he replied. She smiled then, elbowing him playfully.

With the appearance of Beverly, Zeller and Price finally acknowledge them. Price waded closer, pushing his stick around the water to mock as if he were looking for more bodies as he did. Once he was close enough, he waved at the three standing above him. Zeller stayed where he was, but he did look over at them. Will wondered how many more bodies there could be in there with them.

“We’re standing in people soup,” Zeller said.

“We’re spoons,” Price added, moving his stick in broader motions to emphasize his point. “And it’s gazpacho.”

“What?” Zeller called back at him, turning away to look back at Price.

“It’s cold, so it’s gazpacho.”

“I thought that was vichyssoise,” Zeller sounded confused, but continued probing beneath the dark water.

Will turned to tune them out. Bev led him and Jack over to the bodies that were laid out. Bev pulled some gloves out of her pack and held two out to Will, who took them and put them on as he took in the sight of the corpses. They didn’t look like they had been waterlogged. Rotting, yes, but rotting from the inside out. Their skin looked glassy. Almost smooth. One of the victims looked as if he’d been stepped on and the foot broke right through skin and flesh, as if through a thin layer of ice into slush beneath. They all had been preserved on the outside, but it looked like only a few may have had the same treatment from the inside.

“Somebody went to a lot of trouble to preserve them. Been coated with some kind of resin,” Jack said, keeping his distance from where the other two were, from the bodies.

“Big guy was partially sealed,” Beverly pointed out. She was gently prodding part of the flesh that looked more degraded than the rest of it, careful so as not to break it farther. “Rotting from the inside out. The other three look like they were embalmed.”

Will walked along the row of corpses, studying each one. He’d seen this before, although never on a human. His father had a friend who taxidermized and living in Louisiana meant a good portion of his work was done on fishing trophies. They were being preserved in a way that made them retain their liveliness, to look like they weren’t dead, but like they were still living flesh with blood warming their skin. He walked away, back towards the water where Zeller had found a fifth body. It was being lifted out of the water. It too looked preserved but wrong. They all looked so, so wrong.

Jack appeared at his side, looking intensely at him. Will glanced over at him, then back to the water. He knew Jack wanted to clear the scene, to have him imagine himself in the mind of

the killer.

“Are you ready for privacy?” Jack asked quietly, almost as if he was concerned. The profiler looked at him and shook his head, almost laughing.

“There’s no reason, Jack,” he said. Will didn’t need to put himself in the place of the killer to imagine how the bodies got there, or to find out anything new from the crime scene. It almost felt insulting that Jack would call him out for this, but the man wanted to make sure he was on his side. At least if this was a test, it was an easy A. “This isn’t the crime scene. He dumped them somewhere upriver, somewhere far away enough that he didn’t realize they would get stuck before reaching the bay. These were … discards. Something’s wrong with them. He was either practicing and he found a better technique, or they just didn’t fit. He’s preserving them to make models, to … to use them for a purpose. Decoration, or taxidermized trophies of his catches. Tell them to check for injection sites, for silicon.”

“Why silicon?” Jack sounded curious and he glanced back over at the bodies.

“It’s how they preserve fish in taxidermy. Makes them look alive,” Will informed him with a sigh. He watched his father’s friend do it once. The fish was dead but he couldn’t stop imagining how it would feel to be pumped full of preservative. He’d had nightmares. “There will be more victims.”

“More discards?”

“Depends on how quickly he learned his craft,” Will said grimly. He shoved his hands into his pockets and looked back at the line of bodies, at Bev digging through her crime scene kit to start taking preliminary samples. It was odd to think there was a possibility he would never see something as mundane as swabbing a sample again, whether by prison walls or the Ripper’s hand.

“Anything else?” Jack asked. He was visibly relaxing, as if this really was his way of easing Will back into working for him, as if he wasn’t sure if he expected Will to be so cooperative before now.

“No. Get me their information,” Will nodded at the bodies, “and I can narrow the profile down if there are any similarities between the victims. I’d also check upstream for more bodies. But his killing ground or workshop? It’s not upstream. He’s not putting his trash in his own back yard.”

“Fair enough,” Jack conceded.

He walked off to give commands to some other agents. Will watched the scene before him for a while. FBI personnel moving about, taking photographs, tagging, jotting notes down on forms. Standing in small groups while they talked, some laughing as if they were in an office building just shooting shit with coworkers. His gaze drifted across the bridge, towards the trees with yellowing leaves, the sky dotted with crisp white clouds. He closed his eyes and just listened, to birds in the distance, the quiet rumble of water falling over the dam.

Tuning the world out, he imagined sitting in a cell. Where it was quiet, cold, the drip of a sink and the distant cough of another inmate, where he would have been left to rot in the bowels of the BSHCI if not for the stag man coming to take him away to safety.

Will turned and headed away from the crime scene, back to his car. He decided he'd work on his initial report and hang out at the crime scene until his evening appointment. There was no point in driving back to Virginia only to come back to Maryland, especially since he was still on administrative leave from the academy.

occursus

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 19:00

Hannibal rose from his desk, buttoning his suit jacket before checking the clock one last time. It was seven, right on the dot. He strolled across the room and swung open his office door, keeping a pleasant look on his face despite the anticipation he felt. Will stood there in his waiting room, hands in his pockets, jacket held between one arm and side. The man still as he stared out of the window. Hannibal took the moment before Will realized he'd opened the door to study him. The slump in his shoulders, the blank look on his face, how the last rays of the evening sunlight caught his thick lashes and set fire to the blue in his eyes. Hannibal smiled in spite of himself.

"Good evening, Will," he said. "Come in."

"Dr. Lecter," Will said before actually turning to look at him. He returned Hannibal's smile, then entered the office, walking stiffly, nervously. Hannibal closed the door and offered to take his jacket, which was given up willingly to be hung by the door.

They took their places in a practiced dance, Hannibal sitting with his legs crossed and notebook in hand while Will sat across from him, hands on his knees, eyes cast past the person in front of him. He savoured the routine, one he almost deprived himself of, and he settled into his role as Will's psychiatrist, his confidant.

"I was informed of your return to the field," Hannibal said.

"Y-yes," Will nodded and dragged his gaze to the doctor. He almost smiled, but didn't, almost as if he knew Hannibal hadn't expected him to go back to work in such a short time.

"You don't seem to find joy in your return," he noted. "Can you tell me why?"

The empath studied him, his face a mirror to Hannibal's own as he did; clinically detached, devoid of emotion, curious. Will was looking for something that he hadn't found at the crime scene. Hannibal leaned forward slightly, letting his intrigue shine through. Will looked away.

"I… I sat in my car afterwards," Will started, leaning on his habit of speaking each word clearly, separating them from one another, from his emotions. He was building walls back up that Hannibal previously worked to break down. "And I got to thinking."

When he didn't continue, Hannibal probed, "What did you realize, Will?"

"I realized that business as usual never became unusual for them."

"Life moves on?" Hannibal questioned.

“Life moves on.” Will confirmed, nodding and rubbing his hands on his thighs.

“You have moved on. Or, you are acting as if you have moved on,” Hannibal gave him a stern look, slipping away from his psychiatrist mask to let Will see he was concerned. “It has been exactly one week since you checked yourself out of the hospital.”

“One week and four days since I was found,” Will added quietly. “Two weeks and five days since I was arrested.”

“Two weeks and five days since you were taken,” Hannibal added. It earned him a bitter look. Will shut himself away further, sinking into himself, crossing his arms over his chest.

After a deep breath, Will spoke again as if detached from all emotion, “Two weeks and five days since they were all convinced I killed four people. Since the *evidence* convinced them.”

“And yet you rushed back in to your role,” he pointed out. Will only nodded for his response. “Will. Do you remember when I mentioned that you were being abused?”

Will’s eyes fell back on him, once again searching his face. Eventually he relented, relaxing into his chair and rubbing his chin with one hand. “I … vaguely recall. I was very sick, Dr. Lecter.”

“Yes, you were. And I would argue you are sick again, only now it is with a trauma you have yet to begin processing,” Hannibal said, then he shifted as well, mirroring Will’s more relaxed posture. He adopted a concerned look and threaded his voice with worry. “You see yourself as the prodigal son, damned to return to a life where you must prove your worth after judgement was already handed down.”

“I’ve begun processing. I installed extra locks,” Will replied. Hannibal noted his refusal to acknowledge the rest of what he said.

“The new locks make you feel safer.”

“They help,” Will said.

Hannibal nodded. He closed his notebook, not that he had made any notes, and set it on the small table beside him. Will tracked his motions, warily. “Will. I am not going to speak as a psychiatrist, but as your friend. You cannot run back to dear Uncle Jack and expect things to change. You cannot continue to neglect yourself to benefit of your abuser. Your abuser will never break a cycle that benefits them.”

“I am protecting myself,” Will said firmly.

“From whom?”

“From my admirer,” he said with a facetious smile. Hannibal hummed in acknowledgement, but he didn’t respond. He waited Will out, for his explanation, so as not to lead Will to an answer. He was genuinely curious to find out what was going on inside that wonderful imagination of his. “He left me alive. He returned me to Jack. What fun would I be if I gave it all up?”

Hannibal looked away from Will. This had been an option considered, that Will would throw himself back into work, but only if it were in a desperate attempt to reclaim his self prescribed purpose. His tableau was meant to be a gift to Will himself, an ode to the heartbreak that would be a world without him in it, a plea to cross the divide and join him. It was not meant to gift Will back to Jack. He sighed. It was a conversation he would have to have with Will when he was ready for the truth.

“Have you scheduled any follow up appointments?” Hannibal asked instead of engaging in a line of dialogue that could lead to revelations not yet meant for light.

Will laughed at the question, almost bitterly, causing Hannibal to turn back to stare at him. He raised his eyebrows in a silent question, knowing Will would not delve into whether the reaction was over the drastic change of subject or his own neglect of self care.

“No,” he admitted finally, then he took his turn changing the subject. “Why are you treating this like a real therapy session?”

“I treat many of our conversations the same. It’s one of my qualities that most endears me to you, despite what you claim,” Hannibal quipped, allowing himself to smile at the other. Will huffed and stood up. He often felt the need to pace when he had wound himself up or Hannibal pushed the correct buttons. “But to answer your question, I have been working through some emotions of my own. I admitted to you already that I mourned you when I believed you would be incarcerated. I admitted that I wish you had stayed after coming here during your escape. I will admit now that I care for you. You are making it alarmingly clear that I care for you more than you care for yourself.”

The other man had paced, circled the chair as if he would sit and face Hannibal again, paced once more, and he finally settled himself at the desk. He was leaning against it, legs out, arms crossed over his chest. Naturally, he was avoiding eye contact. Hannibal watched him, waiting him out. Will was most likely filtering what he had just told him through years of repression and self doubt, low self esteem and interactions with others that ended poorly. There would be no response until Will filed his confession into a box that made the most sense to him; Hannibal suspected Will would assume he was offering a deeper friendship.

“I am not someone worth caring for,” he said eventually, glancing at Hannibal to try and show he meant what he said.

The answer surprised Hannibal. Unpredictible as ever. But he noted that it was not a reaction of disgust, or shock, or shame. It was not a rejection. “Do you believe you are the only one allowed to make that decision?”

“It’s easier if I’m the one to decide,” Will said with a shrug.

“Alana cared for you,” Hannibal pointed out, almost pettily. He kept his gaze firmly planted on Will, waiting for the acknowledgement of his hypocrisy. Will never gave it, instead turning his head away, making it so he couldn’t even glance at the man.

“Alana thought I was a murderer,” his voice was bitter. Angry. “No. Not a murderer. She believed I was a confused man stuck inside the head of a real killer, incapable of living in

reality.”

Hannibal rose from his chair, buttoning his jacket as he did. He pivoted towards Will and took the few steps to close the gap between them. The other stayed in his position against the desk, head turned to the side. He reached up and adjusted Will’s shirt collar. Will uncrossed his arms and braced himself on the desk, another action that was not a refusal. It was more of an invitation. Hannibal smiled and ran his hands over his shoulders, smoothing the wrinkles from the fabric of Will’s shirt.

“Will. Look at me please,” he commanded softly. Will glanced up at him briefly and looked away again. Gently, Hannibal took the other’s jaw in his hand and guided him to look again. Will allowed it and finally locked eyes. “Have I once doubted you?”

“N-no,” Will whispered.

“Then do not put me into the same category as you place others,” Hannibal said, his smile growing as Will’s cheeks flushed with color. He switched up then, flattening his voice to be more serious and he let go of Will’s face. “I am going to make you follow up appointments in regards to your nephrectomy and your possible ongoing encephalitis. Allow me to care for you, Will.”

“The last doctor you recommended was a quack who got himself killed,” Will reminded him as he looked away from the other’s gaze, down at Hannibal’s pocket square. Snarky, rude Will.

Hannibal slid his fingers down Will’s arms so he could take his hands into his own, lifting them up between them. With a sparkle of humor in his eyes, he kissed Will’s knuckles and said softly, “Then I will be sure to pick physicians worthy of the Ripper’s respect.”

A FARMYARD, SOMEWHERE IN PENNSYLVANIA; WEDNESDAY, 01:27

The first thing Roland became aware of was the smell. The burn of chemicals, almost woodsy but harsh. It made his head swim. It made his eyes water, the tears making them sting. He forced himself to open his eyes and he tried to lift his head up, to look and see where he was. The last thing he remembered was going outside to see why his car alarm had gone off, followed by a sharp pain. It was dark, wherever he was. Maybe he had fallen, maybe he had tripped on something and hit his head on the asphalt.

He laid back down and realized there was something firm that he had been resting against. Lolling his head up, he dragged his gaze across the area, trying to adjust to the darkness. It looked almost like another person was laying next to him but they were hard, shiny. A mannequin? Roland tried to reach out to touch it, but his arm was stuck. He pulled, but it wouldn’t budge. He looked down at his body and realized he was nude.

There was another mannequin near his feet, but it was staring up at him with such realistic human eyes that it made his stomach knot with anxiety.

Roland tried to move again. It felt like he was in a shell, like something hard was holding him in place. He rolled forward but he felt pulling. Something was pulling the skin on his back. He closed his eyes and took a deep breath before counting to five. Once he hit five, he threw his body forward. The sensation of skin ripping from his back caused him to scream and shoot his eyes open again. The room seemed brighter now, now that he was used to the dark.

The horror of where he was sunk in now that he could see more clearly. They weren't mannequins. They were people. He was glued and sewn to another person. To two people. Maybe more.

Feral panic took over. He panted, taking in as much as air as quickly as he could to prepare himself to escape, to feel his skin ripping from itself, to feel the shell trapping his body rip from his flesh. He pulled his legs apart. He tore his arm away, the pain lessening with each pump of his heart, the adrenaline kicking into overdrive. Another pull, another tug and he freed himself, screaming as the flesh from his back ripped away.

He shot up from the ground and he realized it wasn't one or two or even three bodies. It was a sea of people and laid out in a circle. He was so, so close to the middle. Roland stepped through the corpses, feeling as if he wasn't even in his own body, now completely unaware of the agony of his open wounds, no longer smelling the sickly sweet smell of bodies and resin.

Roland searched desperately for a way out. There was a door. He ran towards promised freedom then slammed his body into it.

It didn't open.

Another slam of his body, and another before it broke open, flinging him into the night. He ran. There were cars and he hoped, prayed one might run. One might have a key. He limped out while holding his side where his skin was torn, away from the silo he'd just escaped when lights hit him.

Headlights.

He darted for the cars, for the safety of their metal, not thinking, not even considering it could be help. They were junk, broken windows, smashed doors. The truck that had pulled up on him slammed on its brakes and the driver got out, flashlight in hand. Roland weaved between cars. He took enough time to spot the man before he crawled into an old hatchback, as quietly as possible. He waited until the flashlight passed then he clamored out of the other side and ran. Roland ran and ran until he saw corn.

He dashed into the rows of cornstalks, going only a few feet before weaving to the next row. The flashlight was back. The man was back. Roland darted away from the light, ducking, weaving between rows. Eventually he stopped to catch his breath and he hid, trying to stay silent.

The beam of the flashlight disappeared. All there was again was darkness.

Roland stood up more, looking to see if he could find the man, to find his light when it suddenly blinded him.

The man saw him. He'd found him.

The wounded, frightened man turned around and sprinted as fast as he could, glancing back from time to time to see if the other man was close. The corn field ended abruptly and he was then in a clearing, but there were trees across it. Protection. Cover to hide in. He ran for the trees when shots rang out from behind him. Wood chipped from a tree that took a bullet and the shrapnel hit him in the back of the head as he continued to run. The impact panicked him further, making him strain his legs to go even faster for as long as he could.

Just as he felt like he couldn't run any longer, he came upon a cliff. He stopped, but the flashlight found him again. He looked over the edge. There was water below. He looked back at the man. Back at the water.

The man would kill him.

The water might save him.

Roland jumped.

Chapter End Notes

If anyone knows where James Gray's farmyard is canonically located, please let me know. I tried looking at the scripts, I watched the episode, and I tried to look online. Best I got was it was that it's "400 miles from the dumping ground" by the dam, which is a very large area to narrow down.

9/23/2024: I edited the Farmyard location from the Delmarva Peninsula to Pennsylvania. Pennsylvania is far more likely to have cliffs leading to rivers than Delmarva and the inaccuracy in the geography would bother me if I didn't fix it.

accipiter

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; WEDNESDAY, 05:53

It was dark. Will stared upwards, watching leafless branches move with the wind like black claws cutting through the night sky. He slid farther down into the water, letting the warmth rise, to cover his shoulders, his face, his hair. Will closed his eyes and let himself sink deeper, the dim light fading into blackness. A hand joined his own, grasping his tight. He squeezed back and tried to look at whoever it was, but he couldn't make out any features so far down deep in the water. Just as he was about to reach out with his other hand, he felt himself being pulled by them, torn from the depths. Another face appeared next to him, bloated, yellowing and shiny, almost recognizable. He ripped his hand away from whatever was holding it, turning to see it too was a corpse, coated in a hard resin as it floated up and up. As it slowly spun in the current, Will caught sight of its face, of Alana's face.

Will gasped for air as he broke through the surface. He looked around, spinning in the water, trying to find where the shore was. He struggled to see anything in the dark save for the tree line in the distance, sharp limbs from trees waving their jagged fingers in the sky. Will swam, pushing bodies away as he did. They bobbed in his wake, hands outstretched, touching him. It was a sea of people he knew--Brian, Jimmy, Abigail, Garrett Jacob Hobbs. They bared their lifeless eyes in his direction, mouths open in silent screams.

Hands grabbed at him once more and he fought them. He struggled to keep from being pulled away again, kicking and thrashing to save himself from being dragged under the surface, from being taken farther away from the shore.

A whisper broke through the sounds of splashing and Will stilled, the water following his lead, flattening, quieting. The hands finally grasped him then, dragging him back to where he had swum from, clawing their way around his body until he was held tight around the chest. A chin rested on his shoulder and Will laid his head back, looking up to the sky. The branches were too close, jutting into the sky above him. He wasn't anywhere near shore. It didn't make sense.

Aš tave saugosiu, the thing that had taken hold of him breathed into Will's ear, *aš esu vienintelis.*

The branches were antlers, he realized. Will relaxed, letting his eyes drift shut, letting his body be supported by the stag man, melting into the safety of its arms. It continued whispering, the bodies now no longer bumping into him in the drift of the current.

"Why are you here?" he asked, his voice cracking. The stag man's arms around him tightened in response, almost painfully so.

“Because I am the only one who will ever care for you, Will,” Hannibal’s voice said, smooth and thickly accented, his breath hot on Will’s neck.

Will bolted awake, taking in deep breaths as if he had been under the water again. Once he caught his breath, he rubbed his eyes and sat up, swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. It was still pretty dark outside. Dimly lit, early morning. There would be no point in going back to sleep. He stood and made his way to his kitchen to put on a pot of coffee. Several of his dogs looked up, but the only one who got up to follow him was Winston. He’d take the rest out when they were ready. In the meantime, he and Winston went out to sit on the porch, hot coffee mug warming Will’s hands against the chilly fall air. The cop car was still in the driveway, the interior light on. Both cops were asleep.

“Think I should talk to someone about that, bud?” Will asked Winston, who tilted his head in response. He stubbornly did not answer the question. Will reached down and ruffled the fur around his collar. “Yeah, good advice. My lips will stay sealed.”

He rocked in his chair and sipped his coffee, looking out across the field. Listening to the night, for cracks of branches, for deer or fox. It was peaceful, but it still felt odd. How many nights had he sat in this same chair while the Ripper stood in the tree line just out of sight, waiting for him to go inside to sleep? When had it started? Was it personal, or was it all a game to mess with Jack? Was he just an escalation after taking Miriam Lass hadn’t been as much fun? Had Miriam Lass not been enough of a challenge, someone not worth returning to continue the chase?

Will sighed. He would have to review his own tableau. He would have to look back on the copycat killings, on Abigail’s, and connect them, find the thread that wove them together. The thought of getting inside the Chesapeake Ripper’s head terrified him, and he had no idea how to tell anyone. How he’d get out of his head once he was done. If he could.

Something stepped on a stick, cracking it. Will stilled his rocking chair. Winston raised his head to look at the woods across the front yard. He glanced at the cops. They were still asleep. He stood, casually as possible, and sipped his coffee as he scanned the yard. Hairs on the back of his neck stood up as he caught sight of a dark figure just as Winston began to growl. He tried to remain calm as if he didn’t see it and he moved towards his front door, whistling softly at Winston so he would follow.

“Wait,” the voice called out. Will froze despite himself. He wanted to run inside. He wanted his gun. Why didn’t he bring it out with him? “You’re the one?”

“Stay back,” Will said, finding his voice was commanding instead of fearful. Good. “I have a gun.”

The figure moved closer. Male, tall and lanky, wearing dark clothes. A hat pulled down to cover his face. “I’m not here to hurt you. I just want to ask you for a favor.”

Will didn’t even have his phone with him. He was in a t shirt and pajama pants. At best he had half a mug of barely hot coffee and his fists. He took a deep breath. He told himself he could stay calm. “You should leave.”

“What was he like?” The man asked. He sounded almost eager, hopeful. Like a kid who wanted to talk about Santa.

“Who?”

“The Ripper. He had you for days,” he said. He was moving closer again. Will could almost make out what the lower half of his face looked like now. “I looked you up. I didn’t really get it but seeing you. Now. Here. I can see why he chose you.”

Winston growled again, putting himself between the man slowly walking towards him and his owner. Will reached down and took hold of his collar, but he kept his eyes fixed on the other person. “You need to leave.”

“Can you give him a message?” The man asked.

“No. You need to leave,” Will repeated. He had half a mind to let Winston go, to allow him to bite the man. To have him draw blood. The only thing that stopped him was the possibility of Winston getting hurt.

“Tell him that a hawk you met has faith,” he said. He stopped then, just a few steps shy of the porch. Will held his ground. Winston barked and Will pulled him back closer to himself, making a tsk sound to shush him. The bark set off the other dogs in the house and they got louder until they were right at the screen door behind Will. The man’s head moved. Will could tell he was counting the dogs, or at least he was trying to. He stepped back.

“Get the fuck off my property,” Will demanded as he reached back to touch the handle of the door, a threat that he would release his pack. The man shoved his hands into his coat pocket and turned, taking a few seconds longer to look at Will before he casually strolled away, towards the driveway. Towards the cop car with the sleeping cops. Whoever it was, he was cocky, rash. Most likely he’d be in his early 20s, finally free from the watchful eyes of his parents to start acting on fantasies he’s harbored for years. Will tracked him as he peered into the cop car and then slowly walked up towards the road.

Will waited until the man was almost out of sight before he fumbled the door open, pulling Winston in by the collar and blocking the other dogs from getting out. He locked the screen door then shut the front door. He tried latching the chain he recently installed, but his hands were shaking too badly to get it into the track. He settled for just the deadbolt, then leaned against the door and slid down onto the floor. His pack sniffed at him and climbed on him, demanding pets, licking him when he didn’t acknowledge them. Buster wandered over to a window and made low buffing barks, a warning for whoever might still be outside. One of the dogs almost knocked his coffee mug over and Will tried picking it up, but he spilled it anyway.

It was still early. Will wondered if it was too early to call Hannibal.

The coffee was the only thing that got Will to get up. He grabbed a dish towel from the kitchen and dried it up. The dogs needed to go outside. Will dressed himself in yesterday’s clothes and threw a coat on before collecting his gun and cell phone to take with him. Whoever was out there probably had left, but he wanted to be sure. He also wanted to yell at

the cops for sleeping, but he'd just tell Jack to end the protection detail despite Winston's silent suggestion to not tell.

He opened the door after peering out of the window to make sure the man hadn't returned. Will let the dogs out first. They ran out, immediately tracking the spots the man stood and walked, marking their own scents over his. Will stood on his porch, watching them, scanning the tree line, whistling if any dogs ventured too far to the woods or up the driveway. It was light enough outside now to see out into his yard, the shadows becoming dull color rather than blackness. He wondered if the man would have still spoken to him during the daylight, or if he'd been waiting any other nights for Will to be out in the dark.

The thought made his stomach turn sour. Will pulled his phone out of his pocket and sighed. It was barely past 6:30 in the morning. He couldn't call Hannibal.

Just as he was about to pocket his phone, it rang. It was Jack. Will answered with a simple, "Hey."

"Will. Glad you're up already. We recovered a sixth body in a different river. Only one so far, but we've got agents looking for more. Body's on the way to the lab now. I'd like you to come in," Jack shot out his words in rapid fire. He must have been awake for a while. Will rubbed his face and nodded to himself; it would be good to leave the house. To be around other people.

"Okay," he agreed. "And Jack?"

"Yeah?"

"The cops in my driveway are asleep. Can you just call the whole protection thing off?" Will asked, leaving out the fact that a man was there. A man questioning the Ripper, who thought Will could just talk to the Ripper whenever he felt like it.

Jack let out a long sigh and Will could hear typing. He must be at the office. "Get their car number for me. Wake 'em up, get their badge numbers too. See you in a bit."

The line went dead. Will stared at his phone and scrolled to look at Hannibal's name. He frowned, then clicked the contact info and clicked the 'send message' button instead. It was too early to call. He had never texted him before but he assumed it would be okay. They were friends. Maybe more. He wasn't honestly sure.

Call when possible. Weird situation. Will typed out. He stared at it. Erased it and retyped it. Erased it again. He tried a third time, typing out, *My house isn't safe. Can we talk?* He hit send before he could overthink it.

Will whistled for his dogs and they came running inside. He locked the screen door again, shut the front door and locked the deadbolt, doorknob, and latched the chain, which was much easier now that his hands weren't shaking. He headed for the bathroom to get ready for the day, taking his gun with him and setting it on the counter so he could get to it quickly if he needed to.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; WEDNESDAY 09:00

Will had gotten out of the shower to two missed calls and a text, all from Hannibal. Once he had time to calm down, he had regretted texting him in the first place, but what was done was done. He waited to call Hannibal back until he was already in his car, already on the way to work. He expected a series of questions and concerns, but he hadn't expected to hear the sound of driving. Hannibal had already gotten in his car and was making his way to Wolf Trap to meet him. They spoke briefly--he had been ruder than he should have been, considering he was the one to reach out first--and ultimately it was agreed that Hannibal would meet him at Quantico. The man politely but firmly refused every single time Will told him to go home.

Once Will got to work, he sat in the parking lot and waited. He didn't want to go inside only for Hannibal to try and initiate a conversation about his safety where coworkers could hear. Where FBI agents could hear.

He caught sight of the man walking towards the entrance, so he gathered up his bag and got out of his car then half jogged to catch up to him. Will fell into step next to him and Hannibal only paused briefly, as if he hadn't expected Will to still be outside.

"You didn't have to come," Will said before the other could say anything. That caused Hannibal to stop walking and turn to face him. Will stopped too and glanced up at the taller man. He caught a look that was more curious than concerned, as if Hannibal cared more about his reaction to the situation rather than why he even sent the text in the first place.

"Will, never regret reaching out to me. If you have not noticed," Hannibal lowered his voice to a softer tone and stepped closer to Will, reaching out to touch his arm, "I am more than willing to arrange my day in order to give you my full support and attention. I want nothing more than to give my time to you."

Hannibal's hand on his arm brought memories of his dream, of the stag holding him. Will pulled away and began walking towards the building again. The other followed him, seemingly unperturbed by Will's refusal to be touched or his ignoring what had been said. They walked in silence together as Will badged in and Hannibal was signed in as a guest, and again as they walked the halls towards the BAU department. Will was, for lack of a better word, mortified he had bothered Hannibal, but he did drop everything to come see him, and he knew no matter what, that the other would open his guest room to him again. Hannibal would let him disclose information on his own terms. It was frustrating for Will. No one was that genuinely attuned to how he handled things, no one was okay with his hot and cold behavior, but Hannibal took it in stride.

He stopped walking right before reaching the lab and Hannibal, as expected, stopped with him and waited. Will tried looking up at him but he was… He didn't know, embarrassed or maybe even ashamed, so instead he focused on Hannibal's tie, at the green and blue pattern. "Thank you. I uh, they found another preserved body. I just need to help first. Then I want to talk to Jack. Then you."

“I understand. Please,” Hannibal smiled at him, Will could see his lips turn up, the top lip pulling back slightly from his teeth, sharp as they were. “After you.”

The other opened the door for him and Will stepped through. Hannibal followed his lead as they made their way through glass doors and shorter halls. No one was at their desks, so Will led them to the examination rooms. Jimmy, Brian, Beverly, and Jack were all there. The three were in full PPE, standing at one of the slabs, while Jack stood near a board that had been rolled into the room, pictures of each known victim tacked to it. The victims were staring into the room from their little six by eight inch windows, as if they were watching the examination of the latest victim with Jack. Bev was the first to acknowledge Will and Hannibal, lifting a gloved hand to wave.

“Glad to see you could finally make it, Will,” Jack said with a firm tone. His voice softened and he reached out towards Hannibal to shake his hand. “Dr. Lecter, I wasn’t expecting you.”

“I received a worrying message this morning, so I am here in support of a friend,” Hannibal explained as he shook the man’s hand. Will decided to ignore him, turning away to get his own gloves, to look at the body. Whatever look he gave them before turning away must have stopped any questioning, because no one commented on what Hannibal said. Good.

“When was he found?” Will asked, peering at the body. It looked so much fresher than the others had, almost as if it had only been in the water for a short period of time, as if he hadn’t died much more than mere hours before he was found.

“This morning around five. Some guy who was out fishing said he thought it was a mannequin and tried getting it out of the water to ‘clean up litter,’” Bev told him.

“His name is Roland Umber. He has the same profile as the other victims,” Price said. “He lived alone, disappeared from home, and he had a large dose of heroin in his system. He was much easier to ID; he had prior arrests for drug possession. Our friend here had a predilection for the white stuff.”

“The one major difference is the eyelet punctures are all uniformly torn,” Zeller added, pointing out tearing along the victim’s arm and side, where they had been connected before the tearing occurred.

Jack nodded and added, “The victim wasn’t unstrung. He was ripped from his moorings.”

“Whatever his imperfection, it was enough to aggravate the killer into tearing him down,” Hannibal surmised, glancing at Will for confirmation. He was unresponsive, one arm crossed over his chest and the other propped up so he could hold his hand over his jaw and mouth. He was deep in thought.

“He was discarded in a tributary four hundred miles away from anything that feeds into the dam where the first victims were found,” Beverly added.

“Like dandelion seeds, he casts bodies in every direction but his own,” Hannibal said. He moved away from Jack and leaned down to look at the body, but Zeller was trying to move in the same direction. They almost bumped, so Hannibal stepped around him, but he then did

bump into Beverly. Instead of trying again, he stepped to the side, opposite the table from where Jack stood by the board.

“We know he was dead when he hit the water,” Price continued after everyone settled into their places. “His lungs are dry, but the buffeting in the current caused so many postmortem injuries that it’s hard to tell them apart from the ones he got when he was alive. It’ll take some time to determine premortem from post.”

“There could be evidence preserved in the craquelure,” Hannibal suggested, sounding curious at the prospect. This body had been thickly layered in resin, but it had become spiderwebbed with cracks during its time in the rocky river.

“The what?” Zeller asked, peering over his shoulder at the doctor.

“Craquelure. It’s French for the cracks that appear on an oil painting as it dries and becomes rigid with age,” he clarified for the room. “Cracks are not always weaknesses. A life lived accrues in the cracks.”

“Could be something in there,” Beverly agreed, sounding almost excited at the possibilities of what could be recovered. “Fiber, debris… It might help track where the body was before it was dumped.”

Zeller pulled the light closer to the body and the three leaned in to check, to see if the naked eye could see any starting point for collecting possible new evidence. Will wandered away from the table, to the board that had each known victim’s picture and details hung on it. He picked up a folder that sat on the table nearest the board, which housed known missing persons who matched the criteria of the known victims. He began laying their photographs out on the table. Once they were all laid out, Will studied them, the sound of people talking behind him fading into the background. He closed his eyes.

The pendulum swung. He took a deep breath. He felt his stomach knot.

Will opened his eyes.

There had to be a logical explanation that didn’t require an imagination, that didn’t require him putting himself in the mind of the killer. He pulled the six pictures of the known victims down and set them on the table with the missing persons pictures. He realized then that Jack was standing close to him, looking over his shoulder.

“What else do all the victims have in common?” Jack asked. Will glanced at him and frowned, before turning his attention back to the table. He began rearranging the photographs. As he worked, Price and Beverly wandered over. Eventually, Zeller followed, joining the group in watching Will work.

Will had them rearranged by the date each person went missing. The victims with lighter skintones were generally reported missing the earliest, and the darker the skin, the less time they had each been missing. He plucked out the pictures of the outliers, of the few possible victims who didn’t fit into the color gradient of light to dark. They most likely weren’t victims of this killer, or they could be replacements for the discards.

“It’s a color palette,” he said.

Hannibal was the last to join them around the table of pictures, but he looked down curiously on the display Will had laid out. “The color of our skin is so often politicized; it would almost be refreshing to see someone revel in the aesthetic for anesthetic’s sake. If it weren’t so horrific.”

“He’s making a piece of art. He doesn’t see them as human, but as a medium to complete his masterpiece,” Will said, stepping away from the table. He glanced at the board again with the descriptions of each victim still hung up, scanning over the list of details about the latest victim’s life. “Umber was actively in recovery?”

“Yes,” Beverly confirmed.

“He would have needed a higher heroin dose than the rest. He wasn’t a discard. He wasn’t torn from his moorings. Not by the killer,” Will said, glancing at the group of people staring down at the pictures. “He escaped once he woke up. Our killer will be desperate to finish his piece before he’s caught.”

“You heard him, get to work,” Jack commanded. The three stepped away from the table of pictures, moving back over to Umber’s body to continue their examination, now with the extra task of painstakingly going over each crack in the resin for residue.

Will pulled his gloves off and rubbed his eyes under his glasses. He was tired. He needed to sleep, to rest. He turned to Jack. “Can we talk?”

“Absolutely,” he said. Jack glanced at the body one last time, at the techs working, and seeming to be satisfied he headed out of the room. Will followed, and after a few moments of studying the scene as Jack had, Hannibal went after them. Jack led them to his office and held the door open for Will, who hesitated in the doorway. He wasn’t sure yet if he wanted Hannibal in the room or not. It wasn’t anything serious, but it could mean he would ask questions that Will didn’t really want to answer, or he could bring something up that would cause Jack to ask questions.

As if he had read Will’s mind, Hannibal sat himself down in one of the chairs in the hall outside of the office. He settled himself in and turned his attention up at Will, an almost innocent look on his face. Will frowned at him. He went into the office and shut the door behind him. Jack had already seated himself at his desk and was pulling files out of his drawers. Either he had more work for Will or he didn’t expect their conversation to last.

Will sat.

Jack glanced up at him with an expectant look on his face.

“A man was in my yard this morning,” Will admitted after a few beats of silence. At his words, Jack’s entire demeanor changed. He sat up straighter and the files on his desk were forgotten, his face turning into a thinly veiled mask to hide both anger and worry.

“You got the badge numbers of the two officers?” Jack asked, his voice hard. He picked a pen up and pulled out a notebook, ready to take notes. “And I’ll need a description of the man. What time was this?”

“Jack, he knew what he was doing. Dark clothes, hat, didn’t lift his face enough for me to see anything but his lower jaw. He was white, young, thin, and tall, which narrows it down to no one. Walked right up to the cop car as he left,” Will said, squeezing the arms of the chair with his hands. He was angry when he should be worried. It had been such a cocky move. “He asked me to give the Ripper a message.”

“A message?”

“He said, ‘tell him a hawk you met has faith,’” Will said, mimicking the tone the man had used.

The agent across from him sighed and leaned back in his chair, staring at Will with that same stern look on his face. Will looked away, focusing instead on the corner of the desk. He hadn’t tried to figure out what the phrase meant, if it meant anything at all. He had been so focused on the fact that someone, a stranger, had shown up at his house and waited for him to be outside, alone, to talk. It wasn’t just some random person who figured out where he lived, who just wanted to know about a serial killer, about the guy who survived him. Someone like that would either get spooked by the cops in the driveway or just walk right up and ring the doorbell during the day. It was someone who idolized the Ripper in some way. Someone who might get upset if the message went undelivered.

“Any idea what that means?” Jack asked. Will shook his head. He heard the man writing something else down, then the pen hit the desk as he threw it down. “We’ll sit on this. I’ll have some agents go out and look at your yard. Shoeprints, hair caught in a tree, anything they can find. We’ll check gas station cameras to see if any cars come and go around the time he was there. In the meantime, get a hotel. One with security cameras.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Will said as he stood. He turned to leave, then stopped himself. “I’ll write up my profile on the killer and send it to you by tonight. I’m going … not home. But not here.”

“Send me the badge numbers too,” Jack reminded him. He returned to the files he had pulled out of his desk before they spoke. Will made it to the door of the office when Jack cleared his throat, loud enough that it was a definite demand for attention. He turned around to see him looking at him with an almost amused expression, “And Will? If you go out drinking with Hannibal again, be mindful of who’s watching.”

Will all but rolled his eyes like a petulant teen. Freddie Lounds must have written something about him being drunk. She must be running out of materials, out of ways to accuse him of working with the Ripper or ways to accuse him of murder. She probably wrote some trash about him faking his nephrectomy since he shouldn’t have had as much to drink as much as he did as soon as he did. He turned and left Jack’s office, pulling the door closed behind him. Hannibal had been on his phone but once he noticed Will, he pocketed it and gave him his full attention. Will just sighed and began walking, knowing the other would get up and follow him. He didn’t want to talk to Hannibal yet. It seemed wrong to do it there. It would be better

to talk at his office, or one of their homes. He decided they would discuss where they should go in the parking lot and he led him away from the halls of the BAU.

Chapter End Notes

A translation for the Lithuanian whispers: "I will keep you safe," the thing that had taken hold of him breathed into Will’s ear, "I am the only one."

propius

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; WEDNESDAY 12:38

One thing Hannibal had yet to anticipate was receiving a text from Will, so when the light buzz of his phone had alerted him to a message from him in the early hours of the morning, Hannibal was caught off guard. Had Will thought about their session from the night before and come to the conclusion that he wanted to remain strictly professional? It would be a bump in the road, yes, but a wholly expected one. However, once he had opened the message and read the words *My house isn't safe. Can we talk?*, something happened inside his body that he had not experienced since he was a young man, spurned and let loose into the world to navigate it on his own: he felt a pang of anxiety. Small, but present enough to demand his immediate attention.

He had called Will within moments of the text coming through. Will, predictably, did not answer. Hannibal had checked the clock and stood, perfectly still, waiting for an appropriate amount of time before he tried calling a second time. Once again, his call went unanswered.

Many thoughts had gone through Hannibal's head: Will could be in danger. He could have had a nightmare and reached out, in which case, he needed to be present so Will would know he could rely on him. He possibly could be skipping his medications again and hallucinating.

Hannibal had chosen to just go to Wolf Trap. To see Will with his own eyes. As a courtesy, he sent a response text that read, *Will, I am going to come visit you to calm my mind. I hope you are safe. I will be there as quickly as traffic will allow.*

Twenty minutes into his drive, Will had finally called him back. He said he was fine, that he was on his way to work, and that he wanted to talk about why he sent the text later. Hannibal had been adamant that he would not have sent the text if he did not feel it was absolutely necessary and that he would meet him at Quantico, and they would decide from there. Will agreed only after realizing that Hannibal coming to check on him was non-negotiable.

It had gone well. Hannibal once again got to see behind the veil, to learn some more of their techniques, and to give a helpful, if not time consuming, suggestion. Will had been upset the entire time. Distracted. Hannibal patiently waited him out until, after a short meeting with his boss, Will had agreed to talk to him once they left. Hannibal had told him he wanted to go to his home with him, so that's what they did.

Now, hours later, he was finally pulling into Will's driveway. Will was already out of his car, saying something to the two cops who were outside of their police cruiser rather than sitting inside it. Hannibal put his Bentley in park and watched them; Will was irritated but trying to act like things were fine. He was ducking his head and pulling his lips back into the facade of a smile, the same way he acted when he was talking to someone who was annoying him but he thought he wasn't letting it show. Hannibal smiled to himself.

Once it looked like their conversation wound down, Hannibal got out of his vehicle and made his way towards them, towards Will. He nodded at the police officers in a greeting and they

nodded back, but he otherwise focused on following Will into his home.

“It seems that your protection detail failing to protect?” He asked Will, giving him an amused smile as they walked to the house. Will rolled his shoulders in a shrug as he went up on the porch and opened the door, unlocking both the deadbolt and knob with his key. His pack came running out, giving Hannibal minimal attention before they went off to search the yard. He was not interesting to them; he was a normal presence at this point and he had a severe lack of treats for them. Instead, they were busying themselves with sniffing out the unfamiliar.

“A man was in my yard this morning,” Will said, almost nonchalantly, as he moved inside. Hannibal followed him, that unfamiliar pang of anxiety nagging at him once more, and he closed the door behind him. If nothing else, the extra layer of security would help to ease Will’s anxieties. “Cops were asleep at the time.”

“Will,” Hannibal’s voice was firm, “would you please help me to understand why you would withhold this information from me?”

Will didn’t look at him but he stopped walking. He rubbed his forehead and pulled his glasses off, hooking them onto his shirt. He opened his mouth but he hesitated, disappearing into his thoughts. Hannibal waited almost impatiently. Will’s desire to contact him during a stressful time was a sign of progress, but he would have to work towards making Will fully comfortable doing so in the future.

While waiting for the other to gather his thoughts, Hannibal glanced out of the window, staring over at the cop car. They were both back inside the vehicle, limiting their view of Will’s property, and so soon after a breach. Visions of stringing them up passed before his eyes. He could do it. He should do it. It would only make Will fear his home more, and it would encourage the theory that the Chesapeake Ripper was taunting the FBI. A punishment for their failure at protecting his precious Will. If it wouldn’t ruin his plans, it would be done that night while Will slept soundly in his guest room, miles away. Hannibal decided he would still speak with the officers on his way out. Perhaps they had business cards.

“I shouldn’t have texted you. I wasn’t thinking clearly,” Will said eventually.

“Will,” he returned his attention back to the other. Will was looking at him, a look on his face that Hannibal had yet to see outside of conversations about how Will felt after killing of Hobbs. It was almost dark, calculating. Hannibal wondered what Will had seen in him and if he welcomed it, or if he simply mirrored his own expression. He stepped closer. “Tell me what happened this morning.”

“I had a dream that woke me up,” Will started, his gaze dropping from Hannibal’s eyes to his mouth. His own expression faded, turning blank as he spoke. “It was too late to go back to sleep, so I went outside with Winston. A man approached me, wanting to talk about the Ripper. He wanted me to give him a message. Then he left.”

A message? Hannibal studied Will’s face, his body language for any sign of his reaction beyond his minimal feeling of safety being taken from him yet again. Will was hiding. “This angered you?”

“I wanted to shoot him,” he admitted in a whisper. Will glanced up at Hannibal. He was seeking approval.

“May I ask why you did not? He was an intruder threatening your safety,” Hannibal pointed out.

“I didn’t bring my gun with me. I almost let the dogs attack him,” Will said. He slumped his shoulders and turned to walk to his kitchen. Hannibal trailed behind him. He watched as Will started taking pills out of his medicine bottles, and how he threw them into his mouth and used his hand to cup water from the faucet. Will wasn’t taking his medications on schedule, he noted to himself.

“That may have alerted the police to the man’s presence. Perhaps you should have.”

“No. I didn’t want them to get hurt,” the empath said as he turned his attention to the outside, out through the windows. Hannibal could see him counting his dogs, making sure they were all still there, still out in the yard.

He moved across the room to stand next to Will, within his personal space. The other did not move away. They watched the dogs for a few moments, until Hannibal turned to face him. Will shifted to face him as well, but he leaned back against the counter, hands crossing over his chest. Putting a barrier between them even if he didn’t put distance there.

“What was the message?” Hannibal asked.

“He said, ‘tell him that a hawk you met has faith,’ whatever the hell that means,” Will huffed out with a soft laugh.

Hannibal leaned against the counter as well, turning so that he was not facing Will any longer. The attending from the State Hospital called himself a hawk, and this message confirmed what Hannibal had suspected. It meant he had listened to the recording of his and Gideon’s conversation and, more importantly, he wanted Hannibal to know he knew what they were really talking about. The young man was a loose end. A dangerous loose end, if he was more willing to find Will rather than come to him directly.

“Was there anything else?” Hannibal asked.

“He told me he can see why the Ripper chose me,” Will said in a grim, quiet voice. Hannibal looked over at him, wondering what conclusions he’d come to. Will already expressed that he believes he was returned to Jack, as a game for Jack personally. Hannibal honestly had not been aware of who at the FBI would be the one to try and come after him until they came to him for help with Will, and anything that started before Will’s involvement in his case was not personal to Jack. Will was conflating his return to Miriam’s arm. A logical conclusion, but a wrong conclusion. To know exactly why Will thought that would make it easier for him to refute and correct. They would talk about it in detail on Friday, he decided.

“Will,” Hannibal moved away from the counter, closing the distance between himself and the other. He chose a concerned tone, speaking in a lower, more intimate voice. “My guest room is open to you. Please, pack your things and come back with me.”

“My dogs,” Will said. It wasn’t a refusal. It was a half-hearted attempt at an excuse, but not an outright no.

“I will board them if Alana is unwilling to take temporary custody,” Hannibal said with a smile. Will was looking up at him, searching his face, his eyes. Reading him.

Will relaxed, uncrossing his arms from his chest. He broke eye contact and looked down again, at Hannibal’s chest, before he very hesitantly reached out and took one of Hannibal’s hands in his own. He watched Will’s face curiously as his hand was squeezed gently, and he returned the gesture. He had yet to see the introverted man initiate contact with anyone, not unless it was under duress, to stop bleeding. It was fascinating seeing his expression turn nervous over something so simple as hand holding.

It made Hannibal want to bite into him, to kiss him just to see his reaction, to see if he would run away and hide.

Instead, he laced their fingers together. “Will?”

“Thank you,” Will said and squeezed Hannibal’s hand one last time before taking his away, ending their brief contact. He stepped to the side and Hannibal backed away to give him the space he was asking for. “I’ll go pack some things.”

Hannibal watched as the other exited the kitchen, heading towards where his bedroom was. As inconvenient as the attending showing up at Will’s home was, the results of his intrusion so far were positive. If it helped to bring Will closer to him, he would welcome it. In the meantime, if the young man showed up at his home in Baltimore, it would help that Will was there; it would appear as if he was stalking Will rather than point any fingers towards Hannibal himself.

He went to the front door and whistled for Will’s pack, making sure to use the same tone he’d heard the other use before. They all came obediently running back inside, a few sniffing at his hands in search of sausage, before they headed off to their beds. Hannibal stepped outside and quietly closed the door behind himself. While Will was getting his things, he would speak to the officers and walk himself around the yard in search of anything that might indicate what the attending had been doing before speaking to Will. He was sure if Will told Jack about it, there would be agents there at any moment to look the property over. It would be best for him to do it first.

BSHCI, MARYLAND; WEDNESDAY 16:45

“Agent Crawford,” Frederick Chilton said with a big smile as he limped towards Jack, who was waiting for him in the lobby of the State Hospital. “I wasn’t expecting you.”

“No, you weren’t,” Jack confirmed, holding his hand out to shake the other’s. Chilton shook his hand, then repositioned his cane to support himself once more. “I’m here to follow up on the incident with Gideon.”

“Ah. Yes. That,” Chilton’s face fell, but he kept a smile to be cordial. “Well, let’s discuss this in my office.”

“That would be lovely. Thank you, Dr. Chilton,” Jack said. He had driven to Baltimore to follow up on the report about Abel Gideon falling from a stairwell and becoming paralyzed. Of course, the man was claiming inmate abuse, spinning tales of conspiracy by the judge, by Chilton, by the FBI, and the state of Maryland itself to get back at him for his misdeeds and to cover up manipulation by Chilton himself. Jack just wanted speak with the doctor before deciding if it was worth pursuing. Even if it wasn’t, Jack had an ulterior motive. He could have had any agent below him come ask questions, but Chilton had been the one to sign Will off on his psychological evaluation. Jack had some questions.

Limping more now than he had been while greeting Jack, Chilton led him through corridors and up a stairwell until reaching his office. It was an odd time--after visiting hours, before dinner hours, many employees’ shifts coming to an end soon--so the walk was quiet and uneventful. Jack spent his time looking around, into doors that had glass, at whatever attendings or guards he could see. Of course, nothing looked out of place or odd. Chilton always seemed to have this place in order. Jack wondered if he should even bother asking to see Gideon in the medical ward.

Once they arrived at the office, Chilton settled himself in behind his desk, motioning for Jack to take a seat in one of the chairs. He did, nodding his thanks as he sat, and he took a moment to look around the room. It was well organized, a bit too grand for his taste, and looked very much the same as the last time he was there. If Chilton was harboring some deep seeded resentment towards Gideon, it wasn’t manifesting itself with his work environment. Jack turned his attention back to the man, a stern look on his face, not quite ready to open up.

“I didn’t think you made house calls for such trivial matters, Agent Crawford,” Chilton started. He was nervous.

“An inmate left paralyzed by your guards and threatening legal action isn’t very trivial, Dr. Chilton,” Jack said. “Care to tell me exactly what happened?”

Chilton frowned at him, but he took a small keyring out of his pocket and fumbled around for the right one, then he unlocked a drawer in a filing cabinet. He pulled out a folder and slid it across the desk to the other. Jack looked down at it, then reached out to pick it up once Chilton motioned for him to take it.

“This is the official report. Everything you need is in there. Witness statements from both the guards involved, as well as the nurse who was staffing the office that Gideon fell on. Gideon’s statement is in there as well, but it is e*xtremely* embellished with falsehoods,” Chilton said with a hint of annoyance to his voice.

Jack leafed through the report. The first guard claimed that Gideon had been difficult from the moment they entered the stairwell, refusing to walk and needing to be half carried down the stairs, until he began struggling after a short argument between him and the other guard, then Gideon ended up falling over the railing. The second guard stated that Gideon was uncooperative, making crass remarks about the nurse he killed, and tried to lunge for him after he was told to stop talking and during the struggle, he tried running off and tripped over

his chains, tumbling over the rails. The nurse claims he heard a commotion above him, some laughter followed by arguing, and then Gideon landed on the bars above him. As for Gideon's statement, he claims he was eagerly walking back to his cell so that his chains could be removed when the guards started hassling him about the nurse, but he stated he was not well at the time and apologized, only to be attacked viciously. He claims he had to jump to avoid having his head bashed in, and it continued in that fashion to go on to complain about his treatment, the quality of food, and more.

With a huffed laugh, Jack tossed the file back down on the desk. "I take it there are no security cameras in the stairwell?"

"No, but I am having our budget reassessed to see if we can afford their installation," Chilton said. "This is a state funded hospital with very demanding wards, Agent Crawford. Each penny has to be used wisely."

"Understandable," Jack agreed. He leaned back in his chair. It was time to discuss his second reason for coming to the BSHCI. "While I'm here, let's talk about Will Graham."

"Ah, Will Graham," Chilton's face shifted from annoyed to pleased. He leaned forward, resting his elbows on his desk. "He's a fascinating man, isn't he?"

"Yes. Fascinating, and already back in the field," Jack said.

"Isn't that what you wanted?" Chilton asked. Realizing then what kind of conversation this was going to be, he tensed again, reaching for and fidgeting with his cane.

"Ultimately, yes. But I want to make sure he wasn't rubber stamped," Jack said, his tone more serious than it had been for the Gideon issue. "There are people raising suspicions about why he was let go alive, right after being accused of and arrested for four murders. He was eager to get back to work within days of waking up in the hospital."

"Are you insinuating that he needs to be close to the FBI?" Chilton looked almost surprised when asking.

"Did he mention anything that would give credence to that theory?"

Chilton laughed nervously. Of course, they hadn't spoken about anything during the so-called evaluation but he couldn't let Jack know that. He had been so eager to get Will's consent to study him that he hadn't even considered any possibilities that he could be in cahoots with the Ripper himself. The idea itself seemed preposterous, but… Chilton shook his head and leaned back, waving a hand in the air. It really was ridiculous. The man had been severely ill before his arrest. There would have been actual evidence rather than suspicions and finger pointing.

"Agent Crawford," he said, plastering a smile on his face. "Graham is a smart man, but he isn't a bad person. I would be more worried that he's burying his own victimization and he would now feel more responsible for stopping killers because his empathy for victims could kick into overdrive since he has personally been in their place. That is, if he hadn't passed his evaluation with flying colors."

Jack nodded, considering what Chilton had said. He was worried about Will. The timeline of events were odd. Will had been 'losing time' on a semi-regular basis but hiding it. He was suspected of murdering four people and there was evidence that made it abundantly clear that he could actually be guilty. He kidnapped Abigail Hobbs, took her across state lines, then 'lost' her. After his arrest for the copycat killings, he was immediately taken by the Chesapeake Ripper, who then revealed he had been the one responsible for the four murders by displaying Abigail's body. Jack had even humored the idea that Will *had* been the copycat killer and the Ripper was only taking responsibility so that Will would be indebted to him, to start directly helping him from inside the FBI. That Will and the Ripper killed Abigail together, that Will knew he would be healthy enough to leave the hospital after waking up because he consented to his kidney removal.

But Chilton was right. Will wasn't a bad man.

"I was just surprised," Jack admitted. "He never consented to evals before and then he goes through a week of Hell, only to pass one perfectly."

"Yes, well," Chilton shrugged and visibly relaxed. "Perhaps he was just afraid the wrong psychiatrist would try to get into his head."

"And you were the right one?"

"Apparently I was," Chilton said with a smile. He looked at his watch and then gathered up the Gideon file. He locked it away again, then pocketed his keys. "Agent Crawford, did you need to speak with Gideon? I'm afraid you would have to visit him in the infirmary, but rest assured, he is no threat any longer."

"No, no," Jack said. He stood, reaching out to shake Chilton's hand in a farewell. Chilton shook his hand and began to stand as well, but Jack motioned for him to stop. "I'll be on my way. I can see myself out."

"Alright," he said, staying put in his chair. "Mr. Graham did agree to a few therapy sessions with me. If it will ease your mind, I will ask questions. I, of course, will only be able to disclose any information that is direct proof of criminal activity."

"That would be great. Thank you, Dr. Chilton."

"Any time, Agent Crawford. Have a wonderful evening."

Jack turned and left the office. His worries were eased, if only a little. He still wanted to speak with Dr. Bloom and Dr. Lecter, but Dr. Chilton was the safest person to start with. He knew Will didn't speak to him on a regular basis, unlike the other two. It meant his opinion was more neutral, clinical. In the meantime, he would continue having Will consult and he would continue scrutinizing his actions and motives. At least, until the Chesapeake Ripper was caught.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; WEDNESDAY, 20:30

Will was settled in. Hannibal had helped him unpack his bags and hang clothing in the closet of his guest room, while the other organized a few drawers with items that didn't demand hangers. To fill time, Will had worked on his profile of the mannequin killer while Hannibal busied himself with research of his own. In the evening, Will helped him prepare dinner after being set up at a station to mince garlic, chop onions, and loosen his nerves with wine. They dined informally within the kitchen itself, conversation easy between them. Hannibal had savored every sound, every smile, every bounce of chocolate curls when Will threw his head back to laugh. The difference in Will's demeanor from his own home to his kitchen was a beautiful thing to witness.

After cleaning up the dishes, they retired to the study. Hannibal brought Will his medications and a glass of water, cutting off his alcohol intake. There was no need for Will to overconsume, as it could affect his single kidney's function in conjunction with the sedative he was being given. He took his handful of pills obediently, thanking Hannibal for remembering, and then they settled into companionable silence as Will typed on his laptop and Hannibal read on his iPad.

It didn't take long until he noticed Will yawn, his computer almost sliding off his lap. He'd caught it lazily and slid it onto the coffee table with a bit of trouble. Hannibal turned his full attention to the man.

"Perhaps you should sleep. You have had a stressful day, Will," he said, closing his iPad's cover and setting it beside the abandoned laptop.

"Yeah. I guess it just hit me," Will replied. He stretched and Hannibal watched as his eyes closed and he fought to open them again. It was a losing battle. He practically laid himself out in the chair, resting his head on the arm. Hannibal stared at him in silence, waiting for his body to relax and his breathing pattern to change.

Once he was satisfied that Will was no longer consciously aware of his surroundings, Hannibal rose from his own chair. He shut the laptop then picked the other up, careful not to disturb him too much, not to rouse him from his early sleep. Hannibal carried him up the stairs to the guest room, where he laid him on the bed. He carefully stripped Will of his outer clothing, leaving him in his undershirt and boxers, before tucking him into the blankets. Figuring it was what Will would do, Hannibal brought the clothes into the ensuite and balled them up on the floor. He returned to the room and watched Will, who was breathing slowly, steadily, his lips parted ever so slightly, dark lashes brushing his cheekbones. Hannibal walked over to him and leaned down, brushing Will's curls from his face so that he could gently kiss his forehead.

"I will be home before you wake, dear Will," he said, his voice a soft whisper. He would have lingered longer, but he had a busy night ahead.

pavor

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; THURSDAY, 05:13

A mix of luck and hours of research allowed Hannibal to find the farm in which a man was using bodies to create a magnificent mural, an eye made from man to look back at God Himself. Hannibal had very much enjoyed the view from above. The muralist was surprised to see him, but altogether extremely cooperative, especially once he was informed that his piece must be finished quickly and Hannibal was there to assist him in becoming a part of his own art. To grant him freedom evermore, to ensure he left the world conjoined to his work. As payment for his assistance, he took with him one of the killer's legs--a noticeable take--and his kidney. The organ would not be noticed upon first inspection; he had sewn the man's arm across the incision. It would be a gift for Will to find, to learn he was correct in his theory of a masterpiece, to see how much his brilliant mind was still appreciated by his ardent admirer.

The return home was uneventful; it was a quick stop at an abandoned property to switch vehicles, to strip off his outer layer and secure it in a burn bag, to transfer his gains to an insulated, indiscriminate bag to easily bring inside his home undetected, and then a two hour drive accompanied by the evocative melodies of Arcangelo Corelli.

Once home, Hannibal brought the burn bag and insulated cooler inside. He headed straight for his kitchen, to his pantry, where he shut the door behind himself and locked it from the inside. Will would still be asleep, but it wouldn't hurt to be careful. Hannibal moved his butcherblock top table so that he could access his basement, gathered his two bags, and headed down the stairs. The first step was to toss the bag in his incinerator. The second, to don clean protective gear and process the meat into proper cuts and package them for his refrigerator and freezer. He worked efficiently, the room silent save for the sounds of his bone saw, his knife working through flesh, the sound of his vacuum sealer. He found it calming and he had no need for music, as it would take from his appreciation of the process.

The last step was to clean his instruments, burn his second plastic suit of the night, and shower himself. He would more thoroughly shower in his ensuite later, but he wanted to rid himself of any evidence or scents before returning upstairs. Hannibal washed himself and made sure to towel dry so that his hair was barely damp. He hung his clothing in a garment bag and donned a pair of his pajamas, and he carried the suit up the stairs with him. The clothes would go to the dry cleaners later that day. He exited his pantry after standing and listening, smelling for Will's aftershave, once he decided it was safe to do so. The garment bag was draped over the back of a chair, and then he returned to his basement to bring up the vacuum sealed kidney and two steaks of meat. The rest went into his deep freezer.

Once the meat was settled into his pantry refrigerator, Hannibal closed the basement and pushed his butcherblock table back into place. That was his last step before he could return to his room and rest, if only for around two hours. He planned to be awake early in the morning, both to ensure he was up before Will woke up and because he had patients. The amount of

work he's been missing lately has begun to affect his practice, and he had several patients he was unwilling to lose just yet.

Hannibal exited his pantry and hesitated. If Will were to wake up before him, he would most likely come to the kitchen in search of coffee. Will was a simple man and would prefer a normal drip coffee machine as opposed to his Royal brewer. Hannibal returned to his pantry and collected the correct appliance, as well as a coffee grinder, and he designated a place on his kitchen counter for them. He moved to his recipe box and pulled a blank card out of the back to pen instructions on where in his pantry Will could find the coffee beans. He set it on the counter in front of the grinder. After deciding the task was fully completed, he stepped back and took in the sight, took in the change he made for Will. He hoped it would help the other to realize that he was fully welcome in his home.

He made his way up the stairs, only to notice the scent of Will, but it was mixed with worry. Hannibal reached the top and peered into the dim light of the hall, only to see him standing near the guest room door. Awake.

"Will?" Hannibal asked softly. If Will saw anything untoward, he would have to incapacitate him, to resume light therapy, to induce a seizure and convince him what he had seen was a nightmare. But it was Will; he would give him grace before taking any action.

"Hey," Will replied. His body language did not convey fear nor anger. Hannibal stepped closer. Will did not back away.

"Have you had another nightmare?" Hannibal noted that the other was still in his undershirt and boxers, but he had found a robe. He was not sleepwalking. He had been up long enough to dress before coming out of his room.

"No. I just," Will started speaking, then stopped. He must have realized Hannibal was concerned, because he shifted uncomfortably and looked away, down the dark hall. "I'm used to the dogs. Deer, foxes. Owls."

Hannibal closed the distance between the two of them. Will did not move, he did not disappear through the doorway. He reached out and touched Will. When he did not back up, he pulled the shorter man into him, wrapping his arms around him, one hand firmly on the back of his neck. Surprisingly, Will relaxed against him. He laid his head against his chest. Hannibal rested his cheek on the top of his head, closing his own eyes so that he could focus on his sense of smell and touch, so he could focus on the other's body in his arms. He was unsure if Will knew he had left the house, if he knew when he arrived back home. If Will watched him bring any large bags into his home.

"We often search for our usual comforts during times of duress," Hannibal said.

"I have no 'usual comforts,'" Will said flatly. He shifted as if he was going to pull away. Hannibal did not let go.

"Then what were you searching for?"

Seconds ticked by. A minute. Two. Hannibal kept himself calm, waiting for an answer, an explanation that would give him a timeline of when Will awoke. Will remined silent, his head still resting on his chest, his own arms finding their way around Hannibal's waist. Perhaps then, if Will knew he had left, he would not find it odd. He would accept that Hannibal had parts of his life unknown to him.

"Lost time," Will said, his voice quiet, almost pained. "I woke up in bed. My clothes were in the bathroom and I just. I couldn't remember going to bed. I should. I'm taking my medication, Hannibal."

"What did you experience upon waking?" Hannibal fished still for the information he needed.

"Just, confusion. I woke up a few minutes ago and I thought maybe I'd go downstairs and try to remember what I was doing after I finished writing an email to Jack," he admitted. "But I heard you coming upstairs."

If Hannibal had not been focusing on staying relaxed and calm, he would have visibly lost tension. He did finally loosen his grip on the other's neck, easing his arms away so that Will could move if he chose to. "You had a very stressful day yesterday. It is not uncommon for mental strain to affect the physical body. You are still healing, Will. Without proper follow up, we do not know the progress of your recovery."

"I seemed normal to you?" Will asked. He pulled away from Hannibal, stepping back to look up at him. To test him. To read him. Hannibal gave him a level look, then smiled.

"Yes, Will. We discussed the time. You were surprised by your desire to sleep at such an early hour. I insisted you listen to your body," he lied. Will accepted it as truth. Hannibal watched him as his demeanor changed, how he relaxed.

"Okay. Okay, yeah. That … sounds like me," he said, rubbing his eyes, his jaw. He looked tired still, as if he would not have risen from bed had he not panicked over his change of locations, if he'd remembered going up the stairs. Hannibal decided if it were necessary again in the future, he would wait to sedate him until Will was already on his way to bed.

"Will, go back to bed. It is very early in the morning," Hannibal encouraged him, leaning around Will to push his bedroom door more open. Will pulled his robe around himself and turned, peering into the room. He did not go inside. "Will. Please. I am awaiting return calls from two physicians whom I believe will be the best to monitor your recovery. In the meantime, rest."

"Yeah. Thank you, Hannibal," Will glanced at him again, looking at him with that worried expression he so often adopted when he was unsure of what to do. When he was questioning his own sanity. This was another barrier that he had a hand in creating, a rare mistake of his that would need repair.

"I've set up a coffee machine for you. I did not know when you would wake. I have patients in the morning," Hannibal said.

At the mention of work, Will nodded and stepped away, into the room. “Thank you again. Sorry, for … this.”

“I was already awake. It is no bother. Good night, Will.”

Hannibal waited until Will closed the door, until he could tell the other had moved away and towards the bed. He turned and went back to his own room, checking the clock. It was starting to lighten outside, daybreak on its way. He would rest briefly then start his day. Will, hopefully, would not have a need nor desire to return to Jack. It would be best for Will to stay in his new home, to become comfortable there on his own, to feel as if he did not need to leave. Hannibal decided he would prepare for Will a breakfast in the morning that he could easily reheat once he woke up, if their paths did not cross before he had to leave for his office. He would call or message him in the middle of the day to check on him. They would dine together in the evening.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; THURSDAY, 11:47

Will damn near threw himself down at his desk, wincing slightly at the pain in his back. He’d woken up after Hannibal left for work. He took his medications that had been laid out on a small tray with a glass of water on the island in the kitchen. He’d made himself coffee, following directions on the neatly penned note on where to find the whole beans--there was a selection of different roasts, all in very pricey looking packaging--and he ate a piece of quiche that Hannibal had left for him, but he didn’t reheat it. After that, he realized that everything in Hannibal’s home was too nice, too expensive, and that it was too large and too quiet without someone else there. So he left.

His head was throbbing. It hadn’t been this bad since before he started treatment, and he was starting to really worry that whatever they’d given him wasn’t helping anymore. He popped two aspirin, swallowing them dry. He hoped they would help.

The door to the office opened, but he didn’t look over to see who it was. Instead, he busied himself by turning on his work computer; they’d given him his access back some time within the last few days.

“Hey stranger,” Beverly’s voice. Will looked up, glancing at her briefly before returning to try and log in.

“Hey,” he replied.

“Whoa, way too excited to see me,” Bev joked. She rolled her chair from her desk over to his and plopped down, leaning back and, to annoy Will, she threw her feet up on his desk. He grimaced at her.

“Have those been in the lab?”

“Yep.”

“Maybe don’t,” he said flatly. She took her feet down then leaned forward, her elbows on his desk instead. He glanced at her again. She was smiling at him. She knew something, or she suspected she did and she wanted confirmation. “What?”

“Rumor has it, you’ve got a new boo,” Bev said, her smile broadening.

“A what?” He gave her a confused look, his computer now forgotten as he turned his full attention to her.

“A boo. Or, I suppose he’s older and classy, so what would that be? A paramour?”

“A paramour?” Will laughed, almost offended. He pulled his glasses off his face and tossed them onto his desk so he could lean back in his chair and rub his face. He sighed. This had to be about Freddie Lounds and whatever she’d written that made Jack make a remark about him getting drunk with Hannibal. “What did she write about us?”

“She claims you’re boinking your therapist to get precious psych eval approvals,” Bev waggled her eyebrows at him. “Is it true?”

“No. No,” he denied, then he gave her an even more confused look. “*Boinking*? Are you twelve?”

“Don’t deflect, Graham,” Bev said. She pulled her phone out of her back pocket and went to the browser so she could pull the article up. Once at the right page, she handed her phone to him. Will glared at her before taking it. He put his glasses back on and read the title.

“’Master manipulator?’ Like I wasn’t the one being manipulated…” He almost tossed the phone back to Beverly, but the top of an image was visible. He figured he’d at least look at it. Will scrolled down to see the picture of him smiling up at Hannibal, who was holding onto his waist and almost leaning down into him. “Jesus Christ. Is that what I look like?”

“When you look at him, yeah,” Bev said with a laugh. “Reminds me of how I look at a really, really good bowl of soup. Which reminds me, I came in here to get my keys. It’s lunch time. Wanna join?”

Will was scrolling through the article, reading about how Lounds believes Hannibal was meant to fix him but is failing. The second half of the article almost stopped mentioning him and almost exclusively highlighted Hannibal and his own actions in the last few months. Links to other articles about what happened with Tobias Budge, about Hannibal’s involvement in the Hobbs case, Hannibal’s trips to the BSHCI, his visits with Abigail, were all linked within the body. Leave it to Freddie Lounds to drum up drama just so people would click on older articles so she could generate more ad revenue.

“No. I ate. Hannibal made quiche,” Will said, distracted by his reading. He knew Hannibal read Tattlecrime sometimes. He wondered if he’d seen this article and if so, why he hadn’t contacted her to have it removed. It was awfully accusatory and he had a reputation with high dollar clientele.

“So it is true,” Bev laughed. Will shot her another grimace and he held the phone out to her.

“No. I’m just staying at his house. Mine’s not really safe,” Will admitted to her. He was sure she’d heard about the man at his house from other agents by now and she was just being careful not to bring up anything negative.

Just as she took her phone back, it began to ring. Then Will’s started buzzing. He pulled his own phone out and looked at it; it was Jack, texting him an address. Bev answered her phone and Will tuned in to listen to her side of the conversation; it seemed like they had located the crime scene where the mannequin bodies were coming from and they were calling in the forensics team. Once Bev hung up, Will’s phone rang before either of them could say anything. She shrugged at him and he hit the end call button. He texted Jack, *I’m with Katz. Heard the news. On the way.* A simple thumbs up emoji came through moments later.

“I’d offer to carpool, but I don’t live anywhere near Baltimore,” Bev said with a smug grin.

Will picked up his bag and stood. “You won’t drop it, will you?”

“Not until I get a straight answer out of you,” she said, heading towards the door. “Or, should I say, a gay answer? Bi? Demi?”

He shook his head, parting ways with her in the hall. She had to go gather her kit at the lab. Will took advantage of that and headed straight towards his car. Bev continued calling sexualities out to him until he rounded a corner, raising his hand up in a wave. He may or may not have flipped her off.

ABANDONED FARMYARD IN PENNSYLVANIA; THURSDAY, 17:38

Jack looked almost as if he was standing guard, his arms crossed over his chest, long black coat making a large figure out of his silhouette. Will watched him, the serious look on his face, as he scanned the commotion. He was waiting.

Behind him stood three large silos, reaching up towards the orange evening sky. Below them, agents worked to grid the ground, checking for foot prints and other pertinent evidence, setting numbered placards, taking pictures, marking documents. Body bags laid empty, lined up and waiting. The silos were cordoned off by police tape, untouched at the moment. Will knew then that the crime scene was awaiting him. The FBI had put their real crime scene investigation on hold for him. Jack had stopped everything, for him.

Will waved as he walked towards Jack. The man caught sight of him and nodded, stepping to the side to hold the police tape up for Will to duck under. Jack followed him, then they fell into step beside one another while walking towards the silos. Will noticed then the maze of junk cars lining the side of the property, almost blocking off the view of the cornfield. He wondered if any of the vehicles belonged to the any of the victims within.

“Hannibal’s tip about the craquelure paid off,” Will guessed, looking up at the silos as they grew taller, broader while they approached.

“Yes. Bev found corn dust. We started where Umber was found then worked our way up the river until we found abandoned properties next to cornfields,” Jack said, his tone grim. Will glanced at him. The man wasn’t often this bleak unless he was looking at a Ripper scene. He must have been right, there must be a large number of victims. They stopped just short of the largest silo, where a door was hanging off one hinge, the lock clearly broken. “Are you prepared for this, Will?”

Will only nodded. He was not sure if he was ready, but he knew he had to look. He had to know if this killer would still be active, if he’d finished his piece or if it was found before he could complete it, if he would move on to the next. Jack yelled for agents to clear the scene and after a short flurry of motion, it was just the two of them, standing, staring at the dark maw that was the silo’s doorway. Will walked into it.

As soon as he stepped inside, he could hear scraping along the dirt. He turned and saw Jack closing the door behind him. Before looking down, Will turned his eyes to the roof, to the eye in the sky above it all, letting the dimming evening light in.

Once his vision adjusted to the dark, Will looked down upon the mural laid at his feet. It had to be around forty bodies, if Will were to guess, laid out in an intricate design. An eye. He closed his own. The pendulum swung.

I look back upon You, mine own eye made of Creation. Each body placed completes my Vision, but they do not yield an answer. Will saw himself laying down, nude and pale, against the sea of deeper skin tones within the iris of the eye. *A question of Faith leads me here, to lay in my own work, to beg for answers not given by God but by Man.* A figure then loomed above him, dark as night, blocking the stars barely visible in the small opening of the silo above. *This is NOT my design*. The figure above him reached down, taking his arm. An injection calmed him, then set fire to his mind, his heart, his body, then the world went dark.

The blackness was brief. Will’s eyes opened, the sight of bodies around him jerking his brain from fuzzy to alert in an instant. He tried to stand up, to move, to get away but he could not. He could not move his body at all. His arm was stuck on his side, his legs unable to part. Will tried to roll forward, but searing pain in his shoulder stopped him. He took a deep breath. Another. A third. He lifted his arm, his muscles straining, pulling, aching as a pain in his side, in the flesh of his forearm cried out for him to stop. He could not stop. He had to free his arm, no matter the cost. It ripped free, tearing flesh and string, blood warming his side, flowing down his stomach. Another set of deep breaths, fast, hard, and he strained his legs. Skin gave way, the sound of his own body ripping apart sending a wave of nausea through him, but he had to keep going. He had to get out.

The pain came to a crescendo, then adrenaline took its place. He no longer hurt. He only ached for freedom. Will rolled forward, screaming as flesh tore from his back in a large sheet. He could finally move. He stood, legs shaking, vision blurring as he tried to balance.

Bodies. There were so, so many bodies, laid out in a circle, lifeless limbs stuck to shiny, preserved corpses. Will stumbled through them, trying to step carefully. A voice cried out, familiar, feminine. He looked across the silo, only to see Abigail, her body writhing as she too tried to rip her arm free of its binds.

Will changed directions, stepping over more bodies, trying to get to her when a hand reached out, grabbing his foot. Will tried to pull free, looking back to see Georgia Madchen looking up at him, her face frozen, preserved, but eyes wild and searching.

“No, no, no, no,” Will muttered. He pulled his foot free, now slick with blood pouring down from his torn thighs. “You should be dead before you are preserved.”

He glanced at Abigail. She was struggling, pulling. He had to help her, but he couldn’t. He had to leave. He had to escape, to go get help. There was no way he could save her, not if he couldn’t save himself.

Will stepped over more bodies, familiar faces that he could not bear to look at. He closed his eyes, blocking out his friends, his coworkers, victims he had failed to save and he felt his way through until he hit metal. He pushed on it, looking for a weak spot, frantically banging on it until he found the door. Will slammed himself into it, hard, again and again until the latch let loose and he made it out into the night. Into the cool air, into freedom.

“Will!” A voice cried out. The man was back. He fled, darting to the protection of metal, of junk cars. Hiding places. They were too close though, he could still hear voices. See a light. A search light, or flash light, something bright. Something he had to get away from.

He ran and ran, the pain in his legs screaming but unable to overcome the fear, the thought of being sewn back into the mural. He had no idea how long he ran for, but he had lost the light. The sound of voices ceased. All that was left in his world was the smell of dirt, of blood. The sound of the wind passing through the field, of crickets. Will laid himself down, allowing his body to give up, to succumb to its injuries, as he gazed up at the stars in the sky. He could see Cassiopeia. He looked for Cepheus, but his vision was going dark. He closed his eyes. He could rest before he tried to find help.

servatorem

ABANDONED FARMYARD, PENNSYLVANIA; FRIDAY, 01:09

The dark figure returned, hovering over him. Will paid it no mind, staring up, up at the stars above. They were slowly making their long trek across the cosmos, drifting from his left to his right as the earth turned. Periodically, wind blew and cornstalks blackened the sky above. It was peaceful, waiting to die. He hadn't expected the figure to return to him, but he welcomed it. He had not feared the it in the silo. It had only brought him closer to this, to his end.

It sat beside him. Will turned his head if only to catch a glance, to see its antlers outstretched, dancing across the sky as the cornstalks did in the wind. He smiled at it, at the stag man, come to comfort him. It laid beside him, and Will accepted its company, closing his eyes to block out all but the sound of their breathing, of his own heartbeat slowly drumming in his ears. He felt fingers caress his hair, running through it, gently running along his scalp. Its voice began, low and melodic, blending perfectly with the crickets, the rustling of leaves on stalks. If this was death, Will could almost understand granting this gift to others.

"You need to come back to me," the stag's voice said, calm as ever, but he understood him. Will couldn't figure out why. He was accepting this. He was ready. There was no reason it should change now. "Will. You are in a dissociative state. You need to come back to me."

It wasn't the stag. It was Hannibal. Will took a deep breath, overwhelmed suddenly by the scent of his cologne, by his voice, his presence. No longer was the night quiet, but in the distance he could hear voices, he could hear people calling his name. He reached up and covered his ears, closing his eyes tighter, trying to block it out. He was dead. He'd been bleeding out. He'd escaped.

"Will," Hannibal repeated his name. Will felt the other stop stroking his hair, he felt him grasp his wrists, firm but not painfully so. He let Hannibal remove his hands from his ears. He let his eyes open, catching the other man's amber stare. "Have you come back to me?"

"He didn't kill me," Will croaked out, his voice breaking, his throat dry. He could feel hot tears tracking down the sides of his head, into his hair, as he looked back up at the stars. "I had to get out of there."

"Can you tell me where you are, Will?" Hannibal asked him.

"Cornfield. I had to get out of there. I was going to die in there with Abigail," he whispered. It was cold, and he realized he was shaking.

"Will. Abigail was not a victim of the muralist. You are not his victim. You are laying in a cornfield and there is a search party looking for you," Hannibal squeezed Will's hands as he spoke. He pulled Will gently, coaxing him to roll onto his side, to face him. Will did, curling into himself, his teeth chattering, both because he was cold and he was in shock. "Your

empathy disorder is causing you to have a dissociative episode, Will. Do you understand what I am saying?"

"Y-yes. Yes. I do," Will nodded. He did. He was cold, but he wasn't hurt. He wasn't dying. Abigail hadn't been in the mural, Georgia hadn't been. He had slipped into Roland Umber's mindset, almost immediately upon trying to place himself in the killer's mind. He had felt each wound he had seen displayed on the autopsy table. Will felt a sob leave his chest.

"Good. I need us to get up now. Will you get up with me?" Hannibal asked. He waited patiently until Will gave him one nod before he sat himself up, pulling Will with him. They sat for a moment, and Will realized someone else's voice was getting close to them. Hannibal must not have stayed in the grid, if they were using a grid search pattern. It would make the most sense in a cornfield. Will finally looked at Hannibal again, feeling sorry, wanting to apologize, but he didn't think the man would accept it.

"How long was I gone?" he asked instead.

Hannibal stood up then and turned to hold his hand out for Will. He took it, allowing Hannibal to help pull him up to his feet. The man stepped close to him, running his fingers through his hair again, straightening out his jacket, his shirt, dusting dirt from him. He then leaned down to pick his own coat up off the ground. He must have been laying on it, because his own suit did not show any signs Hannibal had been lying on the ground. Will almost smiled to himself at how fussy he was, taking the time to lay a coat out before helping him. Hannibal draped the coat over Will's shoulders, then he set about adjusting his own self, buttoning his suit jacket, straightening his own hair.

"Long enough that I made it here from Baltimore and had a very colorful conversation with Jack Crawford before setting out to locate you," Hannibal said, his voice cold enough that it made Will's feeling of guilt spike. He looked away.

Will pulled the coat tight around his body, still shivering, but mostly now from the cold. He did not want to return to the crime scene. He didn't want to face FBI agents, Bev, Brian. Jack. Explaining it would lead to questions. Ignoring it would lead to different questions. Either probably meant he'd have to have a real psychological evaluation or else he would lose this job. If he lost this, getting his teaching position back…

"Will. We are going back now," Hannibal said as he placed his hand around Will's waist. He allowed it. He didn't care if anyone saw. Everyone already thought they were together, that he was using Hannibal. They started walking, Hannibal leading the way, and Will realized he had no idea where he actually was, how far he'd gone. All he could remember was the primal need to run, to find safety.

They walked in silence, for longer than Will had anticipated, following a path that cut through the stalks. Will wondered if it was the path he ran, if Hannibal was capable of tracking that efficiently that he bested the FBI. He wondered if Hannibal used to hunt, when he lived in Europe. He would ask, later. For now, he focused on following Hannibal's lead, being guided by the hand on his side. Will eventually noticed the looming towers of the silos, illuminated by artificial light. His pace faltered, but Hannibal urged him on, and they broke

through to the clearing, to the line of junk cars. An agent spotted them and Will watched as they spoke into their radio. He looked at the ground.

The agent jogged over and Will silently allowed Hannibal to speak for him, tuning out their conversation, focusing on the ground where he stepped. They never lost pace as the two others spoke, not until they reached the clearing in front of the silo.

Will stood, refusing to talk, to look at anyone who spoke to him, as agents were loading body bags into the back of vans. Others were still pulling bodies out of the mural, bringing them out on stretchers to place into body bags. At one point, he heard Jack's booming voice, then Hannibal's accent sharpened with anger, then quiet again as someone shined a light into his eyes. He blinked away the floating sparks that were left in his vision, and he could feel someone going through his jacket pockets. He caught sight of his keys as they were taken and tossed. Someone would drive his car for him. That was good.

The hand on his waist pushed into him lightly so Will walked where it guided him. He was led to an ambulance, where he was sat on the back. Vitals were taken, all under the watchful eye of Hannibal. They eventually allowed him to get up, to walk away from the ambulance, and he found himself being sat in the passenger seat of the Bentley. The engine rumbled to life and heat began to pour from the vents, easing the chill that had settled into him during his time in the cornfield. He closed his eyes, laying his head against the headrest. Will allowed himself to relax, to fall asleep, knowing he'd wake up somewhere safe.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; FRIDAY, 03:58

Hannibal slowed to a stop and put the Bentley in park. Had he assurance that Will would not frighten, that he would not immediately turn to the law, the trajectory of their night would have been wildly different. Jack Crawford would be laid bare for the world to see how incompetent he is, how his only skill is sniffing out the talents of others as a pig sniffs out truffles. His brain and heart would be ripped from him, only to be wasted, unworthy of even nourishing the bodies of others. He and Will would both be on their way to Italy, to their new lives, where Will would no longer need to squander his gift on the ilk of those who abuse him, where he could come into his own unhindered by the ideals of others.

Instead, Hannibal unbuckled his seatbelt and Will's, then let himself out of his car. He rounded the hood and opened the other's door, who was still asleep. He knelt down, aware his suit was already most likely ruined so a knee on the ground would not matter, and he gently stroked Will's cheek with his knuckles. The other stirred, dazed blue eyes opening, searching until they caught Hannibal's. He smiled at Will, and Will smiled back.

"We have arrived home," he said softly, careful not to startle him.

Will fumbled for his seatbelt, only to find it unbuckled already, and then he got out as Hannibal stood to make space for him. He led Will inside, where he removed his shoes and made Will do the same to save from tracking mud, and he immediately ushered the other into his kitchen. Hannibal began preparing a light meal of leftovers from the dinner he had

foolishly prepared for them the evening before, as well as an herbal tea and a glass of water for Will to take his missed dose of medication with.

Once done, he set the dinner and drinks in front of the other. Will glanced up at him, clearly embarrassed, but he pulled the plate close to himself and began to eat without protesting. Hannibal did not move, choosing instead to stand and watch him eat, to make sure he took his medication. If Will spoke, he would respond. If he did not, he would wait until the other was done and then take him upstairs to his own room. There would be no guest room, no separation this evening. Nothing beneficial would come from Will being alone. He would encourage Will to bathe and dress in clean clothing. He would do the same afterwards. Will would sleep in his bed. He would lay beside him in vigil.

No words passed either's lips. Dinner was finished, medication was taken, and plates were washed. Hannibal then guided Will upstairs and when he tried to veer towards the guest room, he corrected him with a hand on his lower back. Will did not resist. He either knew better than to refuse or he was unwilling to be alone. Whichever it was did not matter, but it allowed him to lead Will to his ensuite.

Hannibal brought water to temperature to run him a bath; he wanted to encourage Will's fantasies of feeling safe in a warm pool. Wordlessly, he then helped Will out of the dirt covered coat. He folded it over itself, soiled side in, and laid it on the counter. Will began stripping himself of his outer layers and Hannibal took them, folding them in the same manner and laying them on the counter with the coat. He turned away to shut off the tub water before he went to take his leave, to give Will his privacy.

"I don't," Will started, his voice unsure, shaky. "I'm not… When does this end?"

His question stopped Hannibal. He turned to look at Will, tilting his head as he took in the pained look on his face, the fear. "Often the lamb that most seeks the approval of his master becomes sacrificial. As long as you seek to appease Jack, he will continue to push you beyond your mind's ability to protect itself. It ends when you allow it to end."

Will took in a deep breath and nodded absently, looking away from Hannibal, to the tub. He pulled his undershirt off and dropped it to the floor. He stripped his boxers off, kicking them into a pile with his shirt, and then stepped into the tub. Hannibal stood, watching, as he lowered himself into the water, down and down until just his head was out of the water.

"I'm not … wholly convinced that I'll heal from this, Hannibal," Will whispered, his eyes cast forward, not looking at the other. "It started with Elise Nichols. After we came back from Minnesota… She was lying next to me. I saw her next to me. What if you were right?"

"Your hallucinations began once you laid eyes upon a murder victim at the behest of Uncle Jack," Hannibal was not asking him this, merely rewording Will's own worries. "Stress has been shown across multiple studies to affect autoimmune responses. The onset of your symptoms began during a stressful event. Will, you are once again looking at the wrong corner for answers."

"If I don't work with Jack, I can't work the Ripper case," Will said.

“And you believe that your wellbeing is secondary to Jack having his Ripper?”

“I believe that I am bound to the Ripper and that he has bound himself to me. If I fail, I won’t survive,” Will looked over at Hannibal once more. Angry, hurt Will. Hannibal was drawn to him, walking closer to the tub where he lay. “If I can’t handle less extreme cases, I will fail.”

Hannibal removed his suit jacket, folding it neatly and laying it on the edge of the tub. He lowered himself next to Will and rolled his sleeves up to his elbows, then motioned towards the shampoos and conditioner. “May I?”

Will studied the other’s face for a moment before he nodded, then he lowered himself so that he could wet his hair. Hannibal reached across and selected a shampoo, and when Will sat back up, he began working it through the man’s wet curls into a lather. Once done, he guided the other back down to rinse, running his fingers through to break the suds apart, taking his time until Will began to relax. Satisfied, he let Will sit back up and he began the process of conditioning his hair.

“I do not believe you have considered each facet of the Ripper’s profile in the wake of your tableau,” Hannibal said once he was done and had again dipped Will’s head into the water to rinse away the conditioner. He no longer desired for Will to contemplate his mental state, his physical symptoms, nor for him to begin to challenge Hannibal’s previous treatments and declarations of possible diagnoses during the last few months. “Perhaps he is not challenging you.”

“You think he really sees me as a star-crossed lover?” Will huffed, almost laughing at the idea that it wasn’t a demand that he return to the FBI, to working cases, to prove he was capable of being the one to finally catch the Ripper.

Hannibal hummed assent, then shifted his demeanor to hide his truth in a flirt. “You are very desireable, Will. He would be a fool to see you as anything else.”

What he said earned him a smile, almost shy. It was a beautiful sight, one he did not expect so soon after a tumultuous emotional break. He caught one of Will’s hands and brought it to his lips, kissing the man’s knuckles softly and offering him a smirk of his own.

“Wash the dirt and corn from your body, Will. I am going to do the same,” he said, getting up and moving away from the tub, to his walk in shower. As Will had done, he too stripped himself, beyond shame or worry that it would be unwelcome. He bathed quickly, aware that Will’s water would begin cooling, and he wanted to ensure they could dry off and dress with one another. The ease of domesticity he felt with Will was something he wanted to cherish, to take each moment and commit them to his mind, to place them within the halls of the palace of his memory. If ever he were to be caught, he would come back to this moment, to see that bashful smile surrounded by heat pinked skin and wet chocolate curls.

They danced around one another as if practiced, as if they’d shared a bathroom many times before, towel drying, dressing in pajamas, and brushing teeth. Hannibal gathered dirtied clothes to place into a hamper while Will dried the wet drips from the floor and hung their towels. When they finished the routine, Will had hesitated, unsure if he was to return to his room or stay, but Hannibal answered his unasked question by sliding a hand around his waist

and pulling him towards the bed. He drew the covers back and they both climbed in. Hannibal settled in beside the other, guiding him to roll onto his side so that the taller man could lay behind him. Once covered up, he laid an arm across Will's side, wrapping it around to place his hand on his chest, to feel his heart beat, his legs tucked up against the back of Will's to ensure the most contact he was allowed. For his own part, the empath had relaxed against the other, his own arms curled up to his chest, his hands holding Hannibal's tight to his body.

It wasn't long until he felt the beat of the other's heart slow, his breath becoming deeper, with longer moments between each. Hannibal pressed his face into Will's damp curls and inhaled, savoring his scent unburdened by cheap soap and garish aftershave. His own body demanded rest, as he had not slept but two hours the night before, and he decided then that there was no better way to sleep than this, snug against his very own Will.

aquila

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; FRIDAY, 10:53

"Dr. Bloom?" A voice caught Alana's attention, and the sound of heels hitting pavement in quick succession. She looked around, only to catch sight of red curls and a tape recorder held out towards her. She turned back in the direction she'd been walking and sped up her pace. "Dr. Bloom, can I ask you a few questions? It's not about Graham."

"Miss Lounds, I have a busy schedule," Alana said. She would have claimed this either way, but she actually did have a busy day ahead of her now that she had rearranged to fit substituting Will's classes into her schedule. She was on her way into the academy, with only seven minutes until the lecture started. She did not have time to humor the woman who egged on and even started rumors about people she knew.

"That's okay. We can walk and talk," Freddie fell into step with Alana despite the fast pace. "I actually have a few questions about Dr. Hannibal Lecter."

"What? You can't pin any new murders on Will so you've moved on to the next person on the list?" Alana asked, frowning at the woman beside her.

"No. Actually," the reporter cut Alana off, walking backwards in front of her before coming to a stop, forcing Alana to stop with her. "I'm more interested in why Dr. Lecter's patients seem to commit so many murders."

Alana huffed and sidestepped around Freddie, checking her watch to make sure she still had time to make it to class without being late. "How could you even know that? He respects his clients' privacy and confidentiality."

"I have my sources," Freddie smirked as she jogged to catch up with Alana. They were almost at the building. "Look. Will's been under his care for months and he's just gotten worse. He freaked the hell out at a crime scene yesterday and they had to send a search party after him. I'm not saying Will's an innocent man, but you saw what Frederick Chilton did to Abel Gideon, and Gideon seems far less impressionable than Graham."

That got Alana to finally give her attention to Freddie. She stopped and turned to face her, her lips pursed into a thin, angry line. "Miss Lounds. I have known Hannibal for a very long time, and I have known Will for years. Will had a rare illness that a neurologist lied about, the reason for which he took to his grave. Neither of these men are killers just because you don't like them."

"Neither of these men are innocent just because you like them," Freddie said, throwing her hands in the air in a gesture of surrender as she started backing away. "Just do me a favor: if either of them give you any indication that they're up to no good, give me a call."

“Right,” Alana said with a roll of her eyes. She adjusted her purse on her shoulder and turned back towards the building, walking away from the conversation. Once she was through the doors and badged in, she fished her phone out of her purse. There had been no phone calls, no text messages from anyone about Will’s supposed ‘freak out’ that he had. No one had even told her that Will was back to work, let alone in the field. It was far too soon for him to be going to active crime scenes; hell, it would far too soon for a person without an empathy disorder to go back to working on crime scenes. She checked the time; she had two minutes. Alana dialed Will’s number. It rang. It continued ringing without an answer. Finally, the default voicemail message came on. She frowned but waited until the beep. “Will, it’s Alana. Please call me when you get this message. I’m worried about you.”

Whatever was going on would have to wait until after the lecture. If Will didn’t get back to her, she’d contact Hannibal. If neither of them answered, she’d storm into Jack’s office and demand answers.

BSHCI, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; FRIDAY, 12:09

For the second time in as many weeks, Hannibal stood in the lobby of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane. He had chosen to forego the courtesy of calling before he arrived in the spirit of surprising Frederick Chilton with a visit. Predictably, it caught the man off guard, which allowed Hannibal ample time to make his presence known to staff, although only one in particular interested him.

After a short wait, an attending made an appearance to bring him through the secured doors and lead him to Chilton’s office. Once delivered, he thanked him then knocked on the door.

“Come in!”

It was rude of him to not get up and open his own office door, but Hannibal supposed he could forgive him his trespass for now. He let himself in, noting the overly eager, if not nervous, smile on Chilton’s face. The man must have heard of Will’s episode, most likely from Jack Crawford, which meant he would be readying himself with excuses wrapped in medical terms, hoping they would fool Hannibal but knowing they would not. Hannibal offered him a gracious smile.

“Good afternoon, Dr. Chilton. I apologize for the unannounced visit,” he said, stepping into the room and shutting the door behind him. He did not bother removing his coat, for he would not be there long.

“Oh, no, no, no. It’s perfectly alright. I’m just curious about what I can do for you, Dr. Lecter,” Chilton said. He had yet to invite Hannibal to take a seat.

Hannibal did so anyway, unbuttoning his suit jacket and sitting with proper posture as opposed to Chilton, who was leaning back trying to assert an air of confidence. “I have come to extend an invitation to my home this Saturday evening, for dinner.”

The man opposite from him visibly relaxed. His smile grew more genuine, and he about sighed with relief. “I would love to come to dinner. Will this be a small affair?”

“Yes,” Hannibal nodded. “It will be just Will Graham, yourself, and me.”

“Ah,” Chilton’s smile turned sour, almost unnoticeably so. He was nervous again, which suited Hannibal just fine. He would not mention what happened with Will and he enjoyed the fact that Chilton did not know whether he would or not. “Well, I am looking forward to it. What time should I arrive?”

“Seven, if you would,” Hannibal said. He paused, acting as if a thought just occurred to him. He then continued, his tone more hesitant than before. “While I am here, may I ask after Abel Gideon? I have heard rumor that he is unwell. The man seemed perfectly well when I last visited, beyond his known mental status.”

“I’ve been advised against discussing Dr. Gideon,” Chilton said. That meant there was a pending lawsuit; a pending lawsuit meant Gideon may end up transferred to another location. A location less accessible than this. “But between you and me, he’s no longer a threat to anyone. It should be difficult for him to escape even low security hospitals when his spine is severed.”

“He will be transferred?” Hannibal asked, choosing to file away the information that Gideon must be paralyzed rather than addressing it.

“Yes. His lawyer has him all set up for the royal treatment,” the man said with a frown. “Some people are blood thirsty killers and others are blood thirsty lawyers. I now have to go up against both.”

“That is unfortunate,” Hannibal said, feigning concern. He looked at his watch to note the time then stood, buttoning his suit jacket before holding a hand out for Chilton--who had not offered his own yet. “I am afraid I must be going. I have had to rearrange my schedule multiple times and cannot keep my next patient waiting.”

“Oh, yes,” Chilton took Hannibal’s hand and shook it, not rising from his chair. Hannibal kept a pleasant look on his face despite this. “I will see you on Saturday. Thank you for the invitation.”

“It will be a pleasure,” he said. A short farewell later and Hannibal stepped out of Chilton’s office. As expected, the attending he came to see was standing at the end of the hall. They acknowledged one another, Hannibal maintaining eye contact for a beat too long before he turned to leave. Matthew Brown followed him, catching up to badge him through doorways so he would not have to wait to be let out by guards at each check point. Once in the lobby, Hannibal continued outside while Brown veered to the side, chatting with another employee through a barred window. If the man were desperate enough ask how Hannibal felt about his visit to Will, he would meet him outside.

Hannibal did not stop to wait once he exited through the main entrance. Normally he would give himself a few moments to enjoy the difference in environments, to go from an old, oppressive prison out into the world of colorful leaves falling from late fall trees, the crisp

scent of incoming colder weather. However, the hospital had security cameras pointed at the front doors. They did not have them in the parking lot.

After reaching his Bentley, Hannibal turned around to glance at the building as he unlocked the car door. Brown was coming out now, walking towards the parking lot in a different direction than he had. He may be young, brash, but he was smart enough to understand what should and should not be seen. He waited, watching as Brown hit a certain point and then turned, now making a beeline for Hannibal, quick steps with long strides. He came to a stop on the passenger side of Hannibal's vehicle, keeping it between the two. Hannibal waited, allowing him to believe he had some control over their contact.

"Did he deliver my message?" Brown's eyes danced with hope; he must have had doubts that Will either would or could.

"Yes. Your message begs the question, who has lost their faith?" Hannibal asked.

The young man laughed, shoving his hands into his pockets as he looked over at the hospital across the sea of cars. He nodded towards the building, then set his gaze back on Hannibal. "He's going to squeal. He's not willing to stick together."

"Perhaps he should seek salvation before it is too late for redemption," Hannibal suggested. He opened his car door as if he were going to get in.

"And Will?" Brown smirked as he asked, shifting on his feet.

Hannibal paused, turning his body so that he was fully facing the younger man. He studied him for a moment, noting the hunger, the eagerness. It was magnificent but uncontrolled. Brown had not benefitted from guidance, nor had he reigned his own self in. "It is believed that the Titan Prometheus once stole fire from the Gods as gift to humans, whom were not yet prepared for the responsibility and consequences. Upon discovering his transgression, Zeus had Prometheus chained to a rock high upon the Caucasus where he was damned to experience his liver consumed by an eagle each day, unable to escape his fate without intervention. Will is not yet ready for the gift of fire."

Matthew Brown nodded, standing taller and squaring his shoulders. He understood. Hannibal sat down into his Bentley and shut himself in, turning the key to bring the engine to life. The young man sauntered off as if he'd just finished a casual conversation, hands stuffed into his pocket, to another car in the parking lot. Hannibal was confident that no matter what inference Brown took from what he said, Gideon would not make a successful transfer from the BSHCI to wherever his lawyer had procured. Whatever else happened after that, Hannibal could take in stride and adjust his plans accordingly, as long as Brown understood the threat he faced if he interfered with Will.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; FRIDAY, 14:38

Keeping himself busy was proving futile. Hannibal's home was too museum-like, too large and cold and perfectly displayed. Will had woken up much later than he normally would. He

then laid in Hannibal's bed until his bladder forced him to get up. His head ached, his feet hurt, his thighs burned from however long he had run the night before, but he managed to make it down the stairs and to the kitchen. Hannibal once again left a tray set with water and his morning medications. He had also left a note for him instructing him on how to reheat breakfast, as well as the lunch Hannibal prepared. Will had skipped the breakfast and went straight for the lunch; it was too late in the day for both meals by that time.

After eating and cleaning up after himself, Will wandered around the house looking for his bag, for his laptop. He wasn't sure if it had been left in his car or if Hannibal had gotten it for him. It wasn't anywhere he looked. The study had no computer that was accessible either; Will knew Hannibal had an iPad but he either took it with him or he locked it in one of the desk drawers. He spent some time looking at the myriads of old books lining the walls, but none of them seemed like easy afternoon reading. After he lost interest in that room, he spent time exploring more of Hannibal's home; the foyer, the room that looked like it should have been a living room, but it was set up for hosting parties it seemed, the dining room where he finally got to inspect which herbs Hannibal grew fresh. He found a storage room wherein Hannibal kept decorations, all neatly labeled in clear plastic boxes, antlers and horns and animal skulls making up the majority of them. It was like Hannibal figured out how to gentrify taxidermy, Will thought with a chuckle.

He ended up returning upstairs to Hannibal's bedroom and climbing back into bed, the lights off, curtains drawn, and he settled in with his phone to work on the mural murderer's profile.

He'd written crime scene reports on bar napkins before. He could handle a first draft on his phone.

The lock screen had multiple notifications on it showing the most missed calls, voicemails, and texts he'd ever received in his life. Will hit the 'clear all' button at the top, then unlocked his phone and went to the call history to get the little red notification to go away. He had six missed calls from Jack, almost twenty from Beverly, a few from Jimmy, one from Brian, two from an unknown number, one from Hannibal, and one from Alana that came through that morning. Will cleared his call log, then opened his texts. Jack texted *Answer your phone* three times. The unknown number sent him a message stating it was an agent from the FBI heading a search party and if he could please respond so they would know whether to start or not. He deleted that one. Bev sent him a text around 5 in the morning saying she dropped his car off at Quantico and to call her when he was feeling better.

After some consideration, Will typed out, *Thanks. All better. Was my bag in the passenger seat?* and he hit send.

Three little dots popped up before he even had time to close his texts. He waited, then, *yes it was r u ok? for real ok* came through.

Yep. What did Hannibal say to jack? He replied.

uhhh i will tell u later it shouldnt have a paper trail LOL

Will rolled his eyes. He could imagine her smiling mischievously and the three of them already making jokes about what to say when he showed back up at the office. He sent back a

thumbs up emoji before pulling up his voice mails. He didn't bother listening to the unknown number or Jack's, immediately deleting them. Thankfully, Beverly did not leave twenty voice mails. Alana did leave one though. He clicked it and put the phone to his ear.

"Will, it's Alana. Please call me when you get this message. I'm worried about you," her voice said, the concern in her voice almost palpable. Will did not call her back. He would later, when he felt like he could handle her calling him unstable again. He didn't need the reminder.

In the meantime, Will finally opened his notes app. He began typing out bullet points to organize his thoughts. *Mural of an eye, forty plus bodies, hidden from world and unable to be displayed outside of silo (private, for killer only), lighter bodies were white of eye, darker bodies were iris of eye except one.* Will stopped typing. The last victim didn't match.

He closed his eyes, recreating the crime scene in his mind. Each body had a place, every third body on the outer rim posed the same as the third before, a pattern. Within the iris, each body lay on its side, circling until the center, where a pale body lay, fresher than the rest. One of his legs was missing, and the wound looked like it had been made recently--he wasn't an amputee until right before death.

Will pulled his contacts up and dialed Jack. It rang twice before Jack's voice barked a hello.

"Jack," Will sat up in the bed. "The killer was in the mural."

"What are you doing working on the case?" Jack demanded, but his voice wasn't as hard as it normally was. He was worried, the same way he had been when he was sicker, when he was losing time but not yet acting erratically. Will frowned at the memory of what he'd done, how he'd been acting around colleagues.

"Does it matter?" Will asked, flatly. He didn't wait for an answer. "The killer was in the mural. He had help to complete his piece. Someone he knew, or someone who knew what he was doing, they placed him into his own work. Have they ID'd the newest victim?"

He could hear Jack let out a long sigh before he heard paper being shuffled around. After a long pause, he said, "Preliminary ID names him as James Gray. His car was found on the farm's property and his face matches the photo on the DMV database. The lab is just waiting for DNA confirmation. He has yet to be reported missing."

"He won't be reported missing," Will said. "He was the killer."

"So who sewed him into his own mural?" Jack asked. "And why?"

"Not sure. Tell Zeller to take extra time with the autopsy, or repeat it if he's done. He was missing a leg?" More papers shuffled, then Jack said yes. Will took a deep breath and rubbed his eyes. "Okay. I guess we'll have to cross reference limb removal with other killers. Was anything else missing?"

"We have forty six bodies. All I have are preliminary results and a freezer truck full of body bags. I'll tell the lab to focus on Gray," Jack rumbled in a harsh tone. "Will, Prurnell is asking

questions. Can you tell me what the hell happened last night?"

Will laid back against the pillows, staring up at the ceiling. He knew what happened. He knew he panicked because he wasn't ready. He knew he should never have tried going back to work so soon. He knew he should have taken time, accepted help and let himself just be a victim who needed recovery time. He should have let his brain swelling come down and he should have called to schedule his follow up appointments from the packet of papers nurse Jessica gave him the morning he left the hospital. But he also knew he wasn't meant for that kind of care. "Jack, I got confused because the killer was in the mural. That's all. No one needed to form a search party. I never asked for that."

"The last time you went missing--" Jack's voice had been harsh, angry, but he stopped himself mid-sentence. Will was glad he did. He wasn't ready for this conversation.

"I wasn't missing. I was just … in Umber's head. Wires crossed from killer to victim. I'm fine, Jack," Will lied. "Just, tell Prurnell that the last time people assumed things about me, the FBI tried falsely arresting me for murder. She'll back off."

That got a huff of a laugh out of Jack. He didn't want to have the conversation either. "Fair enough. Just, take a few days. We'll handle the mural case. And Will?"

"Yeah?"

"Be careful," he said, then the phone line went dead. Will looked at the screen of his phone, confused by the ominous way Jack told him to take care of himself. He brushed it off and pulled up the browser on his phone. There was nothing else he had to do and he felt like he owed Hannibal, so he figured he'd make dinner. Hannibal was always feeding him, even as far back as the second day they interacted. He couldn't make anything as luxuriously, ridiculously posh as the other but Will could pull off decent Louisiana cooking if Hannibal had the right ingredients.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank everyone again for all the wonderful comments! And thank you, everyone who has subscribed to my story. ♥

coena

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; FRIDAY, 18:45

The day had been long, but otherwise successful. Hannibal's last appointment for the evening was tucked neatly away in his home, unable to meet him at his office, which suited him just fine. They would simply make do in his study, where he could discuss with Will what had happened, what he had seen on Thursday when he dissociated, with encouragement on his part for Will to end his tenure with the FBI and Uncle Jack. As helpful as it had been to see the techniques and investigation styles of the BAU, Hannibal's interest in their work was quickly waning.

He entered his home, only to be hit with the scent of something rich and spiced. Will cooked something he had not prepared for him. Hannibal hung his coat and walked softly, as quietly as possible, to his kitchen, where he stopped just shy of the doorway. The empath's back was to the doorway, and Hannibal took the time wherein he wasn't noticed to watch as Will appeared to skim fat from the broth in a Dutch oven. He was being careful not to drip anything, something Hannibal both appreciated and knew that it made sense for him; Will spent most of his time trying not to affect the world around him in a noticeable way, to be invisible, and he is a highly organized man. He had dressed himself in some of the nicer clothes he'd packed with him, and he had one of Hannibal's aprons tied snug around his waist. His curls were under control, brushed back with product to contain them.

Hannibal closed his eyes and took in a deep, slow breath. Will had foregone his horrible aftershave, making it much easier to smell his natural scent, his musk almost naturally sweet now that it wasn't affected by stress, by fear and sickness. The difference between now and the night before was stark, amazing. Will was comfortable.

"Hey," Will's voice caught his attention. He opened his eyes to see a sheepish smile on the other's face, directed at him without eye contact. "I didn't hear you come in."

"I apologize. I was just appreciating the smell of a home cooked meal, unprepared by my own hands," Hannibal said with a soft smile. He finally stepped into the kitchen, rounding the island to meet Will.

"I uh, yeah. Didn't know what you'd like," he said, wiping his hands on his apron. They appeared clean. Hannibal appreciated that Will seemed nervous again, nervous enough that his hands must feel sweaty. He moved closer to the other. "It's *daube*. A Creole take on *daube*, specifically. I didn't know what the cut of pork was, so I wasn't sure what else to make with it. It's something that we'd make. My dad and me, when we could afford meat that wasn't just fish we caught ourselves."

Will had cooked with meat from his pantry. The thrill, the amusement that Hannibal normally felt from serving guests his own hunts paled in comparison to the imagined vision of Will selecting a cut of leg from his refrigerator, searing the meat, salting and spicing it, licking his fingers after transferring it from the pan to the Dutch oven. The urge to have Will feed him

straight from the pot, to take his own forkful and watch as Will accepted the offered bite as if in communion welled up within his chest and pooled low in his abdomen. If one day Will would hunt with him, would accept the whole of him and partake himself, their first true meal would be one of passion, of fingers slipping past parted lips to nourish one another, of kisses that tasted of their dominion over lower men.

Hannibal backed Will up to the counter. He reached up and gently took Will's jaw in his hand, lifting his face so that he had to look up, so the shier man would have to look him in the eyes. He knew what Will would see and he needed him to see it.

"May I?" he asked softly, leaning down to shorten the already close distance between them, his lips brushing Will's own. Hannibal wanted to taste the *daube* on him, to know he himself had tasted the meal, the meat already. He could feel Will's pulse where his fingers lay across his neck and jaw, quick and erratic, as blue eyes fluttered closed and permission was granted with a quick nod of his head.

He pressed his lips to Will's, delicately, applying pressure with fingers on his jaw to prompt him to tilt his head. Will did so, and he pushed his body closer to Hannibal, taking it upon himself to deepen their kiss. They took their time with one another, slow and tender, lips parting as hungry passion took over. Hannibal savored Will's taste, the thyme and tomato and clove mixing with the slightly salted taste of his skin and mouth. His hands found their way to Will's hips, to his lower back, as the other reached up to touch his chest, to grasp his tie, as if he felt he had to hold on, to keep Hannibal from pulling away, from leaving.

Despite holding so tight, Will was the first to break their kiss. Hannibal chased him only a moment before allowing their separation. Will was smiling, his cheeks flushed, and he leaned forward once more so their foreheads rested against one another. Hannibal relished the sight, memorizing the way his lips were kiss reddened, how his dark lashes rested against pinked cheeks, the way he breathed slowly but heavily to catch his breath.

"I'm not … good with these things, Hannibal," Will huffed out softly, his eyebrows knitting together. His eyes remained closed, the world shut out. "I've been told I'm unstable. Uncaring."

"An uncaring man who wished to share with me with a childhood memory. I will keep this in mind," Hannibal said, not bothering to hide the amusement on his face. He pecked Will on the lips, then laughed quietly when that made Will look at him, concern fading away from his face to be replaced with irritation. "I am honored to eat what you have prepared for me and I will enjoy learning about a piece of your past."

Will finally released his tie, half-heartedly trying to smooth it back down. When that didn't work, he settled for resting his hands on Hannibal's chest. A small wall between them, but neither of them made any moves to part from one another, to break contact or actually make it to the dinner table. Hannibal slid his hands farther around the small of Will's back, unashamed to take the time to run his fingers over the scar he'd left. He wondered if Will would allow him to see it. He wondered if it was healing as beautifully as he expected it to, if Will's skin would scar with a pink sheen or a brown hue.

The sound of the doorbell interrupted his thoughts. The only person rude enough to show up unannounced to his home was there in his arms, unless Matthew Brown took their meeting as an invitation to initiate his own contact. Hannibal frowned.

“Go answer it. I’ll plate our dinner,” Will said, his hands falling away from his chest. Hannibal reluctantly took his own hands off of Will’s body, using them instead to readjust his tie and vest as he left the kitchen. He had planned to leave the silk askew, a reminder of what they had done for the other when he avoided eye contact while they dined, since his ties were often a favorite place for Will to look.

As rude as the interruption was, Hannibal made sure to have a pleasant, neutral look on his face when he opened his front door. Standing on the stoop was Alana Bloom, a scarf bundled up to her chin and coat wrapped tight around her body. She did not look pleasant and neutral. She looked annoyed and worried.

“Alana. An unexpected but welcome surprise,” Hannibal swung his door open a little farther, moving to the side to allow her in. She stepped inside, relaxing just a little as he shut the door, blocking the cool air out in the night.

“I’m so sorry for dropping in on you like this,” Alana said, her gaze travelling away from him and down the hall. “Usually, it’s a thing I do to Will. He just so happens to be here instead of at his house.”

“You often visit Will unannounced?” Hannibal asked, genuinely curious and keeping any annoyance out of his voice. He needed to know how often she may or may not come to his house without warning on the days that Will stayed over.

“When I have concerns, yes,” she answered. She was still facing the hall rather than to whom she was speaking. “I spoke with Jack. Will wouldn’t answer his phone or call me back.”

Hannibal offered to take her coat. There was no use trying to turn her away. The woman had driven all the way from Virginia for this. She took her coat off and handed it to him, as well as her scarf, and once they were hung, he led her down the hall to his kitchen. When they entered, Will looked to Hannibal first, then he caught sight of Alana and he froze.

“I meant to call you back,” he said rather than a greeting and he turned to busy himself in the sink, his back to them.

Alana took the sight in, of Will in one of Hannibal’s aprons, how he appeared to be the only one cooking. She raised her eyebrows in question, looking up at Hannibal, who merely smiled and walked farther into the kitchen, around the island. Back to Will.

“Well, you didn’t. I don’t mean to interrupt your dinner, but you can’t hide from what happened,” Alana said, stepping closer but not fully committing to closing the distance between them, clearly not feeling as welcome in Hannibal’s kitchen as she usually did.

“Then don’t interrupt,” Will said flatly.

“Will, don’t be rude,” Hannibal commanded softly. “Have you made enough for three?”

Will glared at him, but Hannibal knew it was misplaced. He was angry with Alana. Hannibal merely looked at him, calm and patient, and Will eventually sighed and glanced away, to the mostly empty sink that held no real reason for his attention beyond an excuse to keep his back to Alana.

“Yeah, it’s stew. Kinda always enough for more than two people,” Will admitted.

Hannibal turned his attention back to Alana, “Would you like a beer while you settle in the dining room?”

“Yes, thank you,” Alana said. She looked back and forth between the two men, clearly deciding that this was not the time. Hannibal was sure she trusted him enough to know he would allow them to speak about it either over dinner or after.

He retrieved a beer for her from the refrigerator, opening it before handing it off to her. He took her to the dining room, where he pulled a chair out for her to sit. With the promise of a quick return, Hannibal made his way back into the kitchen. Back to Will, who had retrieved a third bowl and was portioning out equal amounts of *daube.* Will did not acknowledge him, but Hannibal still stepped up behind him and wrapped a hand around his waist. Will did not tense nor push him away. Hannibal smiled against the back of his neck, taking as much contact as he could while Will allowed it.

“Will, she merely seeks assurance that you are doing well,” he said.

Will huffed. “No, she’s sorry she thought I was a murderer and she’s overcompensating. She told me I was unstable. I was *sick*.”

“If you do not hold me responsible for missing a rare diagnosis, you cannot hold her responsible. Come,” Hannibal reached around Will to start picking bowls up. “Let us have an enjoyable dinner.”

The table had not been set, so while Hannibal brought the *daube* to the table, Will stalled by removing his apron then collecting spoons, forks, and cloth napkins. When he entered the dining room, Alana was seated and patiently waiting, the bowls were set in each spot, and Hannibal was busying himself with decanting a bottle of wine and selecting glasses for them. Will reluctantly set up the napkins and silverware, just handing Alana hers, and then he sat himself in silence. Hannibal brought to the table the two wine glasses--Alana already had her beer--and the decanter, pouring for each of them before he seated himself. He smiled graciously at the two at his table. Alana smiled back, then looked at Will. Will stared at his soup.

“Will was telling me that this is a Creole take on a *daube*, which is traditionally a French Provencial stew with Italian influences,” Hannibal offered as conversation, picking his spoon up. Alana did the same.

“It smells heavenly. You made this, Will?” Alana asked. She took the first bite.

“Yeah,” Will said. He finally picked his own spoon up, turning his attention to the head of the table. Hannibal took the second bite despite normally waiting for his guests, but Will had

made the dinner. It was his time to get to see the reactions of others first. Will smiled when he saw Hannibal's appreciation, saw his eyes close as he savored the flavor of the dish with only his sense of smell and taste. When he opened them again, he caught Will's gaze and offered him a warm smile. Will looked away and began to eat.

"Tell me, Will, is this a family recipe?" Hannibal asked, between bites.

Will cleared his throat and sat back, a fake, awkward smile on his face. "No. My father would usually make it if we had an occasion to, and he usually used beef. I just remembered how much I enjoyed it. Thought I'd make it as a thank you."

For what he was thanking Hannibal for, he did not say. Hannibal didn't push it, choosing to appreciate the gesture privately. If Will wanted to clarify later, he would.

"Well, it's delicious. Again, I'm sorry if I interrupted something," Alana said, looking back and forth between the two. Hannibal noted her change from using the word 'dinner' to 'something.'

"It's my fault. I should have called you back," Will admitted, deciding now was a good time to drink some wine. "I heard how concerned you were."

"Yes. I was. Am," she corrected herself. A few sips of beer later and she turned her focus onto Hannibal. "I'm not implying that you aren't offering him excellent care, but no one will give me a straight answer about what happened. Or why Will is going back to active crime scenes already."

"Our dear colleague, Frederick Chilton, determined that Will here is of perfectly sane and rational mind," Hannibal said, allowing a tone of distaste to come through. "While I agree that Will is sane and rational at most times, the abuse of his empathy disorder has been proven to alter his mental processes."

"I'm right here," Will huffed, drinking more than another sip of wine.

"Did you lie during your evaluation, Will?" Alana asked, point blank. Hannibal sat back as if to remove himself from the conversation, turning his attention to Will also, curious what his reaction would be.

"There was nothing to lie about," he said. A non-answer, but a truth. Alana seemed to understand what he was implying, her lips turning down into a tight frown.

"Are you telling me that he cleared you without actually performing the evaluation? Why would he risk his job, his *reputation* to do that?" Alana was more asking the world in general than either of the two at the table.

"Risk perception differs from person to person. Perhaps Dr. Chilton believed the risk he took would offer him an opportunity worth losing his current standing," Hannibal suggested. "Or he did not believe his actions would come to light outside of the room he and Will shared their agreement in."

Will had yet to explain to him how or why Chilton cleared him so easily. Hannibal had spent the weekend Will was preparing for his psychological evaluation advising him that he would have to pass it successfully on his own, without aid, as it was important that he truly was stable enough to pass. He had expected Will to fail. He should have failed. He should have been disallowed from returning to the field and thus from returning to work, but whatever he and Chilton had agreed to meant he prematurely was thrust back into Uncle Jack's uncaring arms.

"I was ready to go back," Will stated firmly, not humoring the discussion about what Chilton may or may not have done. "I needed to go back to work. He understood that. That's all."

"Then can you explain to me why you ran away from a crime scene?" Alana asked, her tone just as firm. Their meals had been forgotten by all but Hannibal. "And why Jack told me it 'wasn't a big deal' when I asked him what happened?"

"It wasn't. I've had issues in the past where I confused the killer, the victim, and myself. That's all that happened," Will said, then finished off his glass of wine. "I'm not the one who panicked and called in a search party. It was *unnecessary*."

"Will," Hannibal reached across the table and laid a hand on Will's, squeezing gently and rubbing his thumb along his skin. "Please, finish your dinner. We can have this discussion at a more appropriate time. Alana cares for you. It is natural for friends to ask after friends."

Hannibal gave Will's hand one last squeeze before taking his hand back. He smiled at Alana, who he noticed caught the more-than-friendly touch, just as he had hoped. The three returned to their meals, conversation flowing to lighter topics; Will asked how his pack was doing, if Applesauce was enjoying the company, and Alana told him about how classes were going in his absence. Hannibal refilled wine glasses and fetched their guest another beer.

When they had finished their meals and started on their third round of drinks, Alana about gasped when she remembered something. "Oh, you will never believe who's been asking questions about you, Hannibal."

"You will have to tell me, for I am popular amongst the gossips," Hannibal said, slightly amused that she felt it necessary to inform him.

"Freddie Lounds chased me down today," Alana said with the roll of her eyes. "She was asking about you, making claims that you make patients worse."

"Hm. She often cites me as a source in her articles. I am surprised to learn this," he said.

"I thought you saw it," Will said, sounding relieved. "There's one with a picture of us. She's gone from suspecting me of murder to claiming you somehow encouraged me to do it. She still claims I murdered those people."

Alana laughed, taking another drink of her beer before adding, "She really can't accept that she was so wrong about Will."

“I suspect then that there is a valid reason she pursued tabloid journalism rather than a career as a detective,” Hannibal mused, sounding unconcerned. He would have to return to the article and finish reading it, then he would decide what needed to happen. In the meantime, Hannibal excused himself to clean up their dishes. Will stood to help clear the table, both of them encouraging Alana to stay seated until they returned.

Bowls and silverware were placed in the sink. Will started preparing to wash them, but Hannibal stopped him by reaching over to turn the faucet off. Will shifted, turning to look up at Hannibal. He had that look of disappointment he often wore, and Hannibal suspected that his plans for the night not only had gone astray from Alana’s arrival, but his own very forward actions.

“Thank you, Will. This was a lovely gift you’ve given me. Not often do people see what importance nourishment holds,” he said, allowing Will a small window into his own past. The empath studied his face for a few moments, his own softening, before he looked away.

“You went hungry as a child?” Will asked, and Hannibal hummed a soft agreement. “That’s why you’re always feeding people.”

“A story for another time,” Hannibal said.

Will ran his hand through his hair and sighed, more of a nervous sound than anything else. He returned his full attention to Hannibal, who stood next to him, patiently waiting for whatever he wanted to say. “I just wanted to do something for you. I … it was different. Last night. If they had found me first… There’s too much *professional curiosity* about me, and too much has happened. I don’t know if I would be capable of getting back out.”

“I would break you out,” Hannibal promised, truly meaning it, but Will chuckled as if it was a joke.

Alana cleared her throat from the doorway. Will about jumped and looked over at her. Hannibal knew she had been there, that she’d heard Will’s bitter statement.

“It’s getting late. I shouldn’t have dropped in unannounced and now I’ve got quite a drive ahead of me,” she said, again not moving into the kitchen, into the space that seemed to wholly belong to the other two.

“Yes, of course,” Hannibal said, making his way towards the door that would lead back to the hall. Alana followed and Will reluctantly did the same. Hannibal helped Alana back into her coat and scarf.

“Thank you for watching my dogs,” Will said as she was about to leave. “And sorry. For ignoring your calls.”

Alana gave him a pitying look and reached out to squeeze his arm. “It’s okay. I just wanted to make sure you were doing alright. You’ve been through a lot. Please reach out to me if you need to.”

“Yeah, okay,” Will gave her a fake smile, backing up some past Hannibal, who gladly put himself between the two. They bid their guest farewell and Alana made her way out of the door. Hannibal stood in the doorway long enough to watch her make it into her car, before he shut the front door and turned, only to realize Will had gone. Hannibal could hear that he was back in the kitchen, washing up the dishes. He walked back to him, to stand next to him at the sink to dry what Will washed. They did not speak but instead moved around one another in silence until they were done. Will had retreated into his thoughts and Hannibal allowed it; he knew that the other would come to him when he was ready. He no longer needed to encourage him to share.

Will grumbled a goodnight to him after the last dish was dried and placed back into its home. Hannibal watched as he left the room, knowing he would sleep in the guest room that evening. He hoped Will would miss his absence.

postridie

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; SATURDAY, 11:39

Will hid in his room the entire night and into the late morning. He didn't go downstairs for breakfast, even when he could smell fresh coffee and something savory that Hannibal had made. He knew Hannibal would act normal, as if nothing between them had happened the night before, and there would be no defensiveness or anger over his quick retreat after Alana left. Knowing that made what happened worse. He could just walk downstairs and act completely normal, or be standoffish, or downright rude and Hannibal would simply let it happen, and he would have no way of knowing if Hannibal was offended or if he expected it and understood and a*ccepted* it. Hannibal had a habit of accepting things in him that others would avoid or try to fix. If any other person looked at him and told him he'd been made a surrogate father for a girl whose father he murdered, then encouraged the behavior, Will would have questioned their motives. With Hannibal, it seemed natural. If any other person had known the things he admitted during the conversations the two had, they would have questioned his sanity and begun the process to admit him, to tell the world he was too broken to be free. Instead, Hannibal guided him and remained a solid foundation for him to fall back on, to the point he knew to do it when he was losing time, losing reality while his brain was on fire.

Even now, as he sat there in Hannibal's guest room going over the entirety of their relationship from the day he was accosted by him in Jack's office to the lingering, passionate kiss in the kitchen the night before, he wanted to go to him, to talk about it, to know everything was fine.

It made Will want to leave.

Will finally got himself out of bed and forced himself to shower, to wash out the product he'd put in his hair the night before, the reminder. He dressed in his most casual outfit, throwing on his favorite, worn boots, then shoved his glasses on his face before he finally made his way downstairs. He would ask Hannibal to drive him to get his car. He'd go check on his dogs. He'd apologize to Alana for not calling her back and being curt with her last night. He'd check on his house, look around the property and see if it was safe enough to return to, if for no other reason than getting his dogs back from Alana. She'd been watching them too often and her overcompensation for believing him a murderer would stop eventually.

He wondered if Hannibal would be willing to stay at his house instead.

He doubted it.

Hannibal was not in the study, so Will moved on to the dining room and when he wasn't there, he headed to the kitchen. Still, no Hannibal. Will wandered towards the big room that he assumed was for parties, where he caught sight of Hannibal seated at a small table, sitting up with insanely proper posture and writing on small rectangles of cardstock. Unsurprisingly,

he was dressed in a patterned suit as if he expected to leave the house, the suit jacket had draped over the back of his chair while he worked.

“Good morning, Will,” he said without even looking up. “Or shall I say good afternoon?”

“Hey,” Will ignored the mention of how late he’d come out of his room. He wandered closer, peering over Hannibal’s shoulder to see what he was doing. “Handwritten invitations?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, looking up over his shoulder and offering Will a warm smile. “I find it is a personal touch that many of my guests appreciate. There is a charm to a handwritten card that one does not get from a mass-produced product, no matter how well crafted.”

Will huffed a laugh, then he leaned in closer to read the date and time. Hannibal was planning his dinner party for two weeks from now. He frowned to himself and decided then that he definitely would check on his property. He shoved his hands into his pockets and started a slow circle around the room, not even sure of what he was looking at to distract himself. He wanted to ask Hannibal to take him to get his car, but he wasn’t sure how to approach the request without the other thinking he was trying to get away from him, to put space between them. Hannibal tracked his movement around the room for a moment, then continued his writing.

“Shall I send an invitation to your home in Wolf Trap, or are you comfortable enough to accept that you will be hosting alongside me?” Hannibal asked with absolutely no indication of what he expected Will to answer in his voice.

“You’re expecting me to run home,” Will said.

“I expect many things of you,” Hannibal replied, this time with amusement in his voice. Will completed another slow circle around the room, this time focusing on the floors. He wondered how often Hannibal had to sweep since it was usually just him in the home. No dogs meant no fur tumbleweeds.

“I didn’t mean to run off last night. It just happened,” he admitted after he completed his loop.

Hannibal laid the card he’d been writing on atop an envelope, then pulled a blank card from the stack. He had a list and crossed a name out, then began addressing the new envelope in his practiced cursive. Once it was done, he laid it atop the finished card and began the process of writing out the next invitation on the blank card.

“I expected you to run off,” Hannibal said after a few moments of silence. Will frowned at him. Of course he had. “What I had not expected was the overwhelming feeling of lust I felt seeing you in my kitchen, preparing a meal for me. If you expect an apology, there will be none.”

“So many expectations,” Will said with a laugh. He rubbed his eyes under his glasses, then started a third circle around the room. Despite thinking about it all night, he didn’t really want to talk about it, but at least Hannibal wasn’t making it weird or awkward. “No. It’s fine. It … was good. Great, actually?”

“I am a more than capable lover,” he said, glancing up at Will with that mischievous sparkle he’d seen in his eyes a few times too many. The empath could feel his own cheeks betray him, turning hot with blush. He looked away, not wanting to see the satisfaction Hannibal would get from his reaction.

“Will you take me to get my car?” He blurted out instead of humoring Hannibal. It was the reason he sought him out, after all.

“So that you may run farther away than a bedroom?” Hannibal laid the now finished card on the addressed envelope. He repeated his earlier process of crossing a name off his list and getting out a new envelope, his attention on the invitations rather than Will once more.

“Sort of. I want to see my dogs,” Will said quietly. He turned his attention to the high ceilings rather than the floor, still paying attention to anything but Hannibal. “And I should apologize to Alana.”

“I trust this isn’t a ploy to remove yourself from dinner tonight?”

“No,” Will huffed out, shoving his hands into his pockets. He considered not coming back in time to be in the same room as Chilton, but he was holding onto hope that this was Hannibal’s way of getting him out of whatever arrangement he suspected Will agreed to. The chances that his psychological evaluation still stood after Thursday were slim, and Will did not want to let Chilton poke around inside his mind if there was no benefit to him. “Wouldn’t want to leave you to deal with his ego on your own.”

“I could excuse rude remarks at my table this evening,” Hannibal hummed, accent thick as he was distracted with writing. Will laughed, happy to know Hannibal held the same opinion of Chilton. He wandered back over to the table he sat at so he could read the current invitation he was penning upside down. It was addressed to Jack and Bella. Will wondered if he was still inviting them because of him or if Hannibal and Jack had spoken since Thursday. He still didn’t know what they said to one another, but he imagined it was something hardheaded from Jack and something full of anger wrapped in sophisticated language from Hannibal. “Let me complete my invitations and then I will take you, if you don’t mind us dropping by the postal office on the way. Please, eat something before we leave.”

Will nodded. He glanced at Hannibal’s list to see only a few names left, before he stepped around the table to head back to the kitchen. He was a bit ashamed that he’d put off coming downstairs as long as he had, but it was done. Hannibal wasn’t upset with him for running off, nor was he offended that he wanted to go get his car. It was strange how he knew how Hannibal would react but he still didn’t feel like he could predict him, not like he could with other people, but it felt good. Will checked the refrigerator and selected leftovers from the night before. He’d eat and wait for Hannibal, then they’d either have a conversation or share comfortable silence in the car. He’d see his dogs and come back in the evening.

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; SATURDAY, 14:03

Hannibal had enlisted Will to help put stamps on envelopes, then they drove to the post office before making their way down to Quantico. It was a long drive and would take a huge chunk of time out of Hannibal's day, but any time Will tried to bring it up, he'd just tell him he wanted to make sure Will was taken care of. Eventually he stopped trying to offer gas money or offering to help around the house to make up for it. Hannibal had dropped him off and Will popped inside to get his keys off of his desk, with the promise of not looking at any case files. He surprisingly didn't want to. Another hour and a quick stop by the pet store for dog food later and Will was pulling into Alana's driveway. He hadn't called or texted to warn her, but she never did either.

As soon as he got out of the car and shut the door, he could hear rounds of barking start. Alana's face appeared in her screen door and when she realized who it was, she opened it and let the flood of dogs out of the front door. Will couldn't help but grin with joy, leaning down to greet each one as they ran to him. Even Applesauce got into his face, sniffing him as if she knew him well. Winston stayed close even as the others lost interest, running off to do their business.

"Hey stranger," Alana said, wrapping her knit cardigan tighter around herself as he walked towards him.

"Hey. I brought dog food," Will offered, giving Winston's fur one more good ruffling before he stood back up.

"Oh thank you. They're like a pack of teenage boys," Alana laughed. "One minute the house is full of food, the next it's gone."

Will dusted the knees of his pants off, then moved to the trunk of his car. He opened it and pulled out two large bags of kibble. "Where do you want 'em?"

"The porch is fine," Alana said. He frowned slightly but did as told, carrying the bags to her porch where he left them by the door. She was still afraid to be alone with him, he supposed. He pet some of the dogs again, who had run over to inspect the bags. Alana had followed him, leaning against the railing, still hugging herself from the cold. "I didn't expect to see you."

"Yeah. I uh," Will started, then stared off to the yard, to the trees across the street. He shoved his hands in his pocket and leaned against the rail on the other side of the porch steps from Alana. "I wanted to apologize about yesterday."

"God, no, don't. I interrupted something," Alana said, she herself frowning. "Mind if I ask what?"

Will chuckled to himself. He'd run to Hannibal after he and Alana had kissed, and now here he was, running to her after he and Hannibal had. The difference is that he wasn't running to her for comfort like he'd run to Hannibal, needing to talk to someone after a rejection. Who else did he have to talk about this with though? Beverly would just make jokes and tell him not to sign any prenups, and she was basically it. Jimmy, maybe, if he wanted the news to spread around the entire FBI from the BAU to the Academy, to field offices across the nation.

It would have been nice to tell Georgia Madchen, he supposed, to let her know it's not the end of the world to have the problems they had, that someone would accept them regardless.

"Hannibal kissed me," Will admitted. He didn't look at her. He didn't have to in order to know she probably looked shocked and maybe even a little mad at Hannibal. She still saw him as fragile, as broken, and she would think it was inappropriate, that he was being taken advantage of.

Alana was silent for a long moment. He could damn near hear her thoughts, but eventually she sighed quietly and asked, "Did you want him to?"

"I didn't want him to stop once he did," Will said. He hadn't known he wanted it until the man asked if he may kiss him, but those two words hit his body like a match striking kindling. "I did stop though. Before you showed up so you really didn't interrupt us."

"But you hadn't discussed what happened yet," Alana concluded. Will nodded. She again was quiet. Choosing her words so she wouldn't upset him, he knew. "I know you two have some weird agreement where he 'isn't your psychiatrist' but this is on the edge of unethical, Will. Are you still going to appointments with him?"

"Not yesterday, no," Will said, but he couldn't deny that they still had appointments for their conversations.

"Let me get you a list of other psychiatrists. You need an outside opinion Will. I know you don't like us inside your head, but you really need to see yourself as a person who needs help. You went through something traumatic. Hannibal can't be your only support," Alana said. She disappeared into her house, the screen door slapping shut behind her. She was gone for a few minutes before she came back out, a folded piece of paper in her hand. She held it out to him. Will took it without argument, shoving it right into his pocket. "At least think about calling someone else. Tell them I referred you."

"Yeah. Okay," Will agreed, knowing he wouldn't call any of them. He offered her a tight smile.

"Okay," she said, accepting his agreement. Alana loosened up then, clapping to get the dogs' attention before calling them. They came running, mostly following Applesauce's lead since she understood Alana's cues. She let them back into the house. "Less professional question here, but really? Hannibal kissed you?"

"You seem surprised," Will huffed out, not wholly offended.

"I just didn't think he was into men," she admitted. "Or relationships. He always seemed the type of man to have short flings."

"Should I be concerned that you aren't questioning me?" Will smiled at her to show he wasn't being serious. "I don't think I've been in a relationship the entire time we've known each other but you're asking about Hannibal."

“I’ll gossip about you with him later,” Alana said with a smile of her own. She hugged her sweater close again, rubbing her arms. “Just be careful with yourself, Will. Call someone, set an appointment up.”

“Okay, okay,” Will said, standing up from leaning on the rail. He stepped down onto the ground from the porch, then turned to say farewell. “I’m going to check out my house. See if it looks like anyone else has been there since I left, so I can stop forcing my pack on you.”

“It’s no problem, Will. I owe you,” Alana said. They said their goodbyes and Will headed back to his car. She waited until he was backing out of her driveway before she disappeared into her house.

The drive back to his house was short. Will pulled down his driveway and the first noticeable thing was that there was no longer a police detail posted there. He parked close to his house rather than closer to the barn, turning the car off and just sitting for a minute to look around. He hadn’t been reissued a gun, nor had he taken his personal firearm with him the day he went to the crime scene, so he didn’t have one with him in his car. He’d go inside and get his own handgun before circling his property.

Will got out of his car after watching for movement and seeing none. For the sake of making sure no windows or doors had been broken into, he made his way around the perimeter of the house. He glanced at the woods, at the ground for signs of footprints. Nothing. No windows were broken or open. The back door was shut and locked. He made his way back around to the front door. It was still locked too. He unlocked it with his key and went inside, closing the door as quietly as possible behind him. He listened.

All he could hear was the soft sound of his central heating keeping his house just warm enough so the pipes wouldn’t freeze if he ended up not coming back home until winter.

He relaxed then. Nothing looked out of place, but he still went around the house to check that all his locks were still set. Once that was done, he went to his fridge and began pulling out food that already had or might soon go bad. He didn’t have much since he’d only gone to the store once his return from the hospital, but it still wouldn’t do to let anything rot in his fridge. He set the trash bag by his front door. He went to his room and stared at his closet. Maybe he’d pack up some more coats and sweaters. It was getting colder.

Will decided he’d do that after looking around his property, just in case he chose to come back home instead of staying at Hannibal’s for much longer.

Before he went outside, Will retrieved his handgun. He made sure it was loaded and he didn’t bother holstering it. He’d carry it. Better safe than sorry, better to have a quicker reaction time. No one was around to tell him he was being paranoid and he felt like he had every right to be this careful. He carried it outside with him, finger off the trigger for safety, and began the trek around his property line. Up the driveway, across the treeline, into the woods on the southern side of his house. So far all he could see was old footsteps that most likely were from agents when they came, because it was in sets of two different shoe sizes. None of the tracks aimed towards his house. They had gone around the perimeter just as he was doing.

Eventually he circled back around behind his barn, and up to the other side of his driveway. Nothing caught his attention. It had been days since the man came to his property, but he was more interested to see if anyone had been there since then. It looked like there hadn't been any activity beyond some animals. Will's last stop was his barn, just to check and make sure the lock was still latched. It was. No sign of movement around it, other than what looked like a groundhog or skunk trying to dig under one of the walls. He shoved his gun into his back pocket, then kicked the dirt back into place and found a cinderblock from behind the barn to put in its place to deter whatever it was for now.

He went back to his house, to his front porch. He stood where he'd stood the night the man came up to his house, retracing his movements, remembering his own actions and what they'd said to one another. Whoever it was truly believed he had direct access to the Ripper. They must be a Tattlecrime fan, believing Freddie Lounds' lies. He hoped that wouldn't translate to them finding Hannibal's home and accosting him there. At least Hannibal's place was in the city, where there would be witnesses, home cameras to deter people from tracking him down. And as far as Will knew, Hannibal's home hadn't ever been stepped in by the Chesapeake Ripper. None of his things had been toyed with, taken, used to frame anyone for crimes. The Ripper had never gone into Hannibal's home while he was there to force feed him the ear of a girl he tried to save.

Will went inside. He shut and locked the door behind him. He went to his bedroom and packed up a few of his warmer coats and some more sweaters. He packed some thicker socks. He'd leave them in the trunk of his car for now, until he either needed them at Hannibal's or came back to his house. He threw a box of bullets into the bag. He brought the clothes bag and his trash bag outside, then locked the house up behind him. The trash bag went into the dumpster and his clothes went into the trunk of his car. He got back into the drivers' seat, putting his gun into the glovebox.

It didn't feel right being there now. No dogs. No safety. No Hannibal. He backed out of his driveway and turned onto the road, heading back home.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; SATURDAY, 19:00

Frederick Chilton was right on time. He stood on the stoop, cane in hand, a prideful smile on his face, as Hannibal opened the door for him. Short greetings and a welcome inside later, and Hannibal was helping him to hang his coat up. He was led to the dining room, where Will was already seated, and he sat opposite him. They offered one another cordial greetings, and Hannibal disappeared into the kitchen. Will immediately shut Chilton out and Chilton did not push to force a conversation that would be one-sided.

Hannibal returned moments later with three plates covered in metal cloches. He set one each in front of Will, Chilton, and his own seat, then removed the cloches to place them on a sideboard.

"Tonight, in honor of our guest, we dine on a dish of miniature lamb kidney tartlets atop a bed of turnip and shallot mash, and a seasonal fall vegetable mix to round out the meal," Hannibal announced. He had not done anything over the top for this meal. He poured each of

them a glass of red wine, careful not to drip from the decanter. “I understand you watch your protein intake now, Frederick, so I will take no offense if you forego the full tartlet. But if you would, please have a taste. They are to die for.”

He offered a gracious smile to his guest as he unbuttoned his suit jacket and seated himself, knowing full well that Chilton himself was missing a kidney. Will was as well, but, whatever offense he may take from the consumption of kidney would be overriden by his desire to see Chilton squirm in discomfort. Judging by the smile on Will’s face, that was exactly what was going through his mind.

Will was the first to take up his silverware. Chilton, knowing that Will was in the same predicament as he, did the same to show he was just as capable. They cut into their tartlets and Will ate the first bite. He smiled at Hannibal, always surprised at how good the food he made was. Chilton forced himself to take a bite as well, humming an agreeable noise. Hannibal smiled at the two, taking his own bite once he was satisfied that they enjoyed the food.

“Delicious as always,” Chilton said, picking up his wine glass to take a sip. “It isn’t often I’m invited to your dinner table. I should have asked the occasion when you requested my presence, but, being a busy man and being caught off guard at work, it slipped my mind.”

“I will admit, I have an ulterior motive,” Hannibal admitted. He motioned to Will, who lifted his wine glass in a solitary toast.

“Ah,” Chilton sat back some, plastering a smile on his face that didn’t quite meet his eyes. “He is an interesting subject. I take it you are interested in co-authoring a paper on his particular disorders?”

“No. He’s thinking about reporting you for rubber stamping my psych eval,” Will said after a sip of his wine. He set his glass down and took another bite of his kidney tartlet, not breaking eye contact with Chilton. Hannibal merely watched Chilton as his face fell.

“Ah ha, no,” Chilton sputtered, then cleared his throat. He shifted in his chair, sitting up so he could lean forward towards them some. “No. I did no such thing. You have absolutely no proof of this.”

“I do not, beyond the word of my dear friend and several witnesses to a severe dissociative episode brought on by his early return to crime scene work,” Hannibal said casually, cutting his tartlet and dabbing a small bit of mash on it before taking a bite. “May I inquire about what you asked of him in return for a passing evaluation?”

When Chilton did not answer quickly enough, Will replied for him. “He wants to study me. Three sessions, for a paper about empathy disorders. He claims he has other candidates and I won’t be named specifically. I suspect that was a lie.”

The man across from Will damn near glowered at him. Chilton tossed his fork down on his plate, making it clatter quite loudly. Hannibal’s gaze drifted from the look he was giving Will down to the fork. How rude. Hannibal cleared his throat. “Frederick, this is not an attack. I

am merely trying to understand your motivation. Will is the sole hopeful party in regard to your being reported."

"Then may I ask why this feels like an attack?" Chilton asked, turning his attention away from Will to Hannibal.

"Perhaps because your actions were self-serving and you are aware of your mistake," Hannibal suggested with a slight upturn of his lips, almost a smile.

"You know Will is a rare case. Not many people with his disorder make it to adulthood. He is an anomaly, prime to be studied," Chilton said, a defensive tone in his voice.

"I do not see Will's empathy as a disorder, Frederick. It is a gift and he understands its worth," Hannibal said. He motioned for Chilton to continue eating, his own mannerisms still relaxed, calm.

"I don't want to be studied, Dr. Chilton," Will said flatly between bites his own food.

"We had an agreement, Mr. Graham," he had the same tone as before, although he did begin to eat once more. "I would think you would prefer to be a man of your word, when you have little else."

Hannibal looked at Will, hopeful to see anger flash on his face, in his eyes. A smile crossed his own face as he was rewarded with thinly veiled rage aimed at Chilton. It was beautiful to see, but he didn't want this coming to a head. He had gotten what he wanted already. "Frederick, Will. Please, you can discuss the terms of your agreement once emotions are not involved."

Chilton gave Will a fake smile, almost smug. He then looked to Hannibal, his expression turning innocent. "Yes. That would be lovely. By the way, has Agent Crawford asked you about Will's eagerness to return to the field?"

"Beyond concerns for his wellbeing, no," Hannibal replied.

"Ah. Seems he may be worried Will *needs* to be close to the FBI," Chilton said with a chuckle as he turned his fake smile back to Will. "How odd would that be?"

"It would be odd indeed," Hannibal said, his own face going blank as he finished his meal. Chilton most likely was misconstruing Jack's words, but the possibility that he was suspicious of Will was good information to have. He had not prepared dessert for this meal, so when they finished their dinners, he made an effort to keep conversation short. Will, predictably and thankfully, made no effort to keep conversation at all. Instead, he busied himself in the kitchen cleaning up their dishes while Hannibal bid Chilton a farewell. He closed his front door and moved silently down the hall to watch Will from the doorway again, to memorize his movements, his comfort level in his home, his kitchen. It could be a good thing if Jack were to be the one to push Will away due to unfounded theories.

furtivus

BSHCI, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 09:08

It was finally time for his transfer. Abel Gideon's lawyer had reassured him on multiple occasions that it would happen, that he would be moved somewhere safer for him, but it seemed like delay after delay after delay kept it from happening. Never mind the fact that he needed 'round-the-clock care now, and from a certain type of hospital with a specialty in housing the criminally insane. He tried telling them he wasn't a threat anymore; how could he be? Chilton's dogs had started a job they couldn't finish and left him paralyzed. Either way, he was being wheeled out of the dank, old infirmary of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, his hands cuffed to the rails of the bed, and an armed guard at his side. The worst part about this morning would be looking upon Frederick Chilton's smug little face, if he were even brave enough to show up to see him off.

The doors to the beautiful outside world opened up, the sky clouded and grey, but oh so deliciously bright with fall morning light that didn't come from a buzzing fluorescent bulb. Gideon closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, savoring the smell of asphalt and concrete rather than the mix of bleach, asbestos, and damp brick. It was Heaven.

Awaiting him was his transport van, flanked by the attending who often bothered him. Marcus, Mathias, something like that. Beside him stood Frederick, cane propped between his legs with both hands on it, head held high. One last look at his victim, Gideon supposed.

"Goooood morning, Dr. Chilton," he called out as his gurney came to a halt. The nurses who were transporting him locked his wheels and went off to open up the vehicle's back doors. His guard stayed by his side, for which he was rewarded a charming smile from Gideon. "That's the man who ordered my attempted assassination, Mr. Policeman. Seems a bit unfair for little ol' paraplegic me to be cuffed," he wiggled his chained wrists, "to this bed while he gets total freedom, *and* a weapon."

"That is enough, Dr. Gideon. What you suffered was an unfortunate accident brought on by your own actions," Chilton said. "I'm simply here to see you off, glad that I will never have to see you again."

"Not until the trial, that is," Gideon mentioned with a shrug of his shoulder and a bored look, scanning his surroundings that were much more interesting than the small man before him.

"There will be no trial. You will throw a fit, get your way for a little while, and then the facts of what happened will come to light," Chilton claimed, confidence in his voice. "In the meantime, I am going to enjoy my peace without your attention seeking games."

"My life is not a game, Dr. Chilton," Gideon said grimly, then he burst into laughter when the other man gave him an unamused glare. "All of yours are, I think. I will be sitting pretty, safe as can be, away from you and your Ripper friend. Aren't you at least a little curious to know who has you fooled?"

His transport van was ready and the nurses returned to steer him towards it, turning his gurney so that he would go in head first. As he passed Chilton, he made a mock attack noise and threw his hands up as far as the cuffs would let him. The man did jump, ever so slightly, covering it up by turning to walk off, relying heavily on his cane.

“Oh, come on, can’t take a joke?” He asked as he was bumpily loaded up into the van. The nurses locked his wheels and secured the gurney to the floor before they got out. The guard and the kid in white scrubs had a quick conversation, then the kid got in with him. The guard did not. Gideon frowned. “Am I really that bad?”

“He says you ‘give him the creeps’ and he’s not taking any risks today,” the kid said with a smirk. He pulled the doors shut behind him and the guard outside latched and locked them in. Gideon watched through the windows as the man walked off, supposedly around the car to get into the front cabin. A few moments later, he heard the passenger door slam, confirming his theory.

“You know. You have been awfully good to me these last few weeks,” Gideon said, turning a charming smile on for Michael or whatever his name is. “Could you be a dear and maybe figure out how to free my hands? My nose itches.”

“Don’t have the key,” the kid said with a smirk. He waved his hands in the air as emphasis that they were empty. Gideon frowned at him, looking back out the windows. Everyone had left already, no one left to wave goodbye. The engine of the van started and it began to roll forward. He watched as the building disappeared when they turned, then it slowly came back into view again as they made their way around the parking lot. It grew smaller and smaller, and he was glad to never have to roll wheel into it ever again.

It felt like the driver wanted to hit every single pothole as they drove. He bounced in his gurney, glad to be strapped down into it, but annoyed that he couldn’t really control where he was seated or how he was positioned. This would have to be another thing he added to the list of complaints for his lawyer. Gideon watched as businesses turned to houses, then houses to gas stations, then gas stations to on and off ramps. They turned onto a highway, which vastly improved the road conditions and how often the driver slammed on his brakes at a stop light or sign.

After a long time of staring at a big rig that was driving behind them, blocking his view of anything but it and the backs of road signs, he turned his attention back to the kid. “So. Your big dream as a youngin’ was to work in a psych ward?”

“It’s more of a safety net, I’d say,” the kid said, that godawful smirk still on his face.

“That’s right,” Gideon said, clicking his tongue. He searched his own memory, trying to remember things the kid said to him during the many hours he lingered outside of his cell. “You wanted to work with birds of prey. Hawks or something. How did that work out for you?”

“Pretty good, actually. I’ve got a big interview coming up.”

“Hm,” Gideon stared at the kid for a moment, and for no other reason than wanting to cover up the sound of his gurney wiggling in the motion of the vehicle he asked, “How the hell do you ‘interview’ to work with birds of prey? Hold your arm out and if it lands, you’ve got the job?”

“You’ll see, soon enough,” was all he got in response. The kid never took his eyes off of him, but he lost interest and looked back out the van windows. They were on an off ramp now, the world spinning in a wide berth around them as they made their way around it and under a bridge. Gideon knew it was going to be a long drive, the hospital that his lawyer got him into being in the mountains of Pennsylvania. From what he was told, it was the closest and nicest one that would take him. He thought that was funny, prisons being selective of their prisoners, but he suspected he may cost more to keep than they’d make to house him. It was the price of infamy.

The road they were on eventually turned into two lanes, dotted lines so cars could pass the slow pokes, and the only thing he could see around them was trees. Slowly less and less cars were visible in the lane behind them, and less cars passed them in the opposite direction. He’d seen at least six cow pastures and several run down, independently owned gas stations with godawful puns for names. A better view than his windowless cell or the infirmary, but boring nonetheless.

Two loud bangs on the metal of the van wall between them and the cab startled him. He looked over at the kid with a frown, “What the hell was that for? I’m trying to count cows.”

“Gotta piss,” he said. The van started pulling off onto the shoulder of the road, kicking up dust behind it. It came to a stop and Gideon could hear the passenger door open, then slam shut. The guard popped into his line of sight through the back window, then the door unlocked, unlatched, and opened.

“What’s going on?” The guard asked, his hand on his holstered gun.

“Just me. I gotta take a leak,” the kid said. Gideon watched as he climbed out of the car and walked around towards the front of the van, on the driver’s side. The guard stared at him, an expression one might describe as ‘mean mugging.’ Gideon smiled back, sweet as could be.

“You know. I wish I could know when I had to piss,” he said with a sigh. “But one of your boys saw to it that I’d never feel my dick again. I suppose he did me a favor though. Not too many ladies chomping at the bit for conjugal visits. I think Frederick scared them all off.”

The kid appeared behind the guard, coming over from the passenger side. Gideon watched as he shoved a needle into the man’s neck. The guard slapped at his neck, then turned to say something to the kid but all that came out of his mouth was an odd groan. The kid pushed him into the van before he was fully dead weight, grabbed his key ring and his gun, then he began shutting the doors.

“Hey, kid,” Gideon called. The young man stopped shutting the doors and looked at him in question. “You breaking me out?”

“Delivering you,” he said. The doors shut, they latched, they locked. He watched the young man disappear again towards the drivers’ side. Moments later, the van set back into motion, looping a U-turn so that they were heading back in the direction they’d come from. Gideon settled in for the ride. Whatever was about to happen would be interesting, at least.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; MONDAY, 11:46

Files on Jack’s desk sat untouched. His coffee sat cooling. He stood at the window, staring out across the campus, the parking lot. Will had been correct about the muralist being in his own work. They not only found that James Gray didn’t fit the same profile as his victims, but he was the only body with an amputation close to death. He was also missing organs. The incision into his abdomen had been hidden under his own arm that was sewn to his torso. Very few known killers in the area practiced organ removal, and even fewer had the skills to do it as expertly as the muralist’s had. Jack had already considered the Chesapeake Ripper, but it would just be too convenient. Too convenient and too frequent. He already had intimate knowledge of other cases Will was working on, and it just seemed wrong that he would immediately involve himself in the first case he worked since being back in the field.

A knock on his door brought Jack out of his thoughts. He turned to see Alana, who was peering through the doorway.

“Dr. Bloom, come in,” Jack said.

“You wanted to talk to me?” Alana said as she stepped inside. She closed the door behind her and walked towards his desk. Jack moved back to his chair, seating himself and motioning for Alana to sit in one of the chairs opposite him. She did.

“Yes. I wanted to apologize for not giving you more details about Will the other day,” he said, picking his cold coffee up to sip. “With Prurnell breathing down my neck, I had to be careful what I said.”

“It’s fine, Jack. I spoke with Will. He seemed like he was doing fine,” Alana assured him. “As fine as Will can be.”

He nodded at her, then tapped the case file on his desk a few times. Jack wanted to ask her some questions, but he knew she would get defensive over Will. Instead, he opened the file and turned it around, sliding it across so she could look at it. “If I could ask your professional opinion, what would you say about the killer who helped our muralist here?”

Alana stared at Jack, trying to judge where this was leading, but he kept his poker face on. She finally looked down at it, pulling it closer to her and picking it up so she could quickly read through the notes and glance at the photographs. He watched her as her lips pursed into a thin line while she got lost in concentration. She was coming to the same conclusions he had. The same jokes the BAU team made, buffering their anxieties of the truth.

“Well, whoever it is has a surgical background, or some type of medical background that gives him intimate knowledge of anatomy. He’s adaptable, willing to kill others in a way that

doesn't align with his own modus operandi. He wasn't afraid of being discovered, otherwise he wouldn't have taken such a large piece of his victim," Alana paused, pointing at a picture of the muralist's amputation. She flipped through the pages again, to the incision with thread marks around it. "He wasn't hiding this incision from us. He knew it would be found in autopsy. He was honoring the muralist's design. Whoever it is, he's highly intelligent and takes pride in his work without feeling threatened by other killers."

"Would you say he's copied other killers' techniques before?" Jack asked.

"I'd say it's highly likely," Alana agreed. She closed the file and set it back on the desk, then leaned back in her chair. She leveled her stare with his. "What are you afraid of, Jack?"

"Coincidences," he said. He sipped his cold coffee one last time before setting it down and leaning forward, towards Alana. "It's just too convenient. Will is framed for murders with details not released to the public, proven innocent in the same way, and as soon as he's back, we have another murderer with signs at his crime scene of a copycat."

"Are you implying that you think Will did kill all those people and he's killing again? Jack," Alana sighed, throwing her hands out to her side. "He was too sick. Actually *sick*, with a disease that couldn't be faked, and we all missed it. He was just getting worse and we all--"

"Alana," Jack cut her off. "I'm not saying that."

"Then what are you saying?"

"Either the Ripper is one step ahead of us and I can't see how close we are, or he's got direct access to us, to our cases," Jack said, his voice low and stern.

"Well stop looking at Will," Alana said with exasperation. She stood up as if she was about to leave, then turned back to stare down at him, angry. "Start investigating whoever keeps giving that Freddie woman information. All of this started when she decided Will was her favorite target, and now she's going after Hannibal."

Jack sat back, leaning his elbow on the arm of his chair and rubbing his jaw. He stared at her, thinking. He supposed she was right; Tattlecrime often had information within articles that hadn't yet been released to the public. The problem with Alana's anger was that Lounds was often correct about things, pointing in useful directions, or coming to conclusions before law enforcement did. Of course, she wasn't always right, and Hannibal had shown time and time again to be helpful and only concerned with Will's wellbeing.

"Why Hannibal?" He asked.

Alana shrugged and crossed her arms over her chest. "I don't know Jack. I suspect it's because it's another way she can hurt Will."

He reached across his desk and pulled James Gray's file back over to him. He tapped it and nodded at Alana. "Thank you."

“I’m serious, Jack. Will was sick. He’s still struggling. You can’t trust gossip and paranoia over trusting him. He needs us all right now. We can’t fail again him like we failed him before,” Alana said, conviction in her tone. She then turned to leave. Jack let her go, waiting until she was out of the room and the door was closed before he leaned back in his chair with a long sigh. He felt defeated. There was no fine line he could balance on for this, but there was some connection between Will and what cases the Ripper could interfere with. Jack just needed to figure out what it was.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 20:36

Hannibal made it home in time to cook a nice meal for Will and him to share together. He had been more casual since the other joined him in his home, often times eating with him in the kitchen at the island rather than properly sat at the table. It made Will more comfortable and he found it to be more intimate, more domestic. Will was often willing to allow him into his personal space, and he relished each moment he could touch his hand to the other’s hip to move Will out of his way, or bump a shoulder into him, or guide Will on a proper chopping technique with his hands over the other’s. He often wondered if Will knew in what ways he was adjusting his own self to make room for Will. He wondered in what ways Will was changing.

Tonight, they had eaten, spoken, theorized. They cleaned the kitchen together. Will had tried running off to his room, but Hannibal stopped him, requesting his company a while longer. He agreed and they retired together to the study, where Will busied himself with building a fire. Hannibal poured them each two fingers of whiskey, then walked over to Will and patiently waited for him to finish to give him his drink.

“I might go back home,” Will said, once he took his glass. Hannibal kept his reaction to himself, instead sipping his drink and dropping to the floor next to Will, who had yet to stand up from building the fire.

“If you feel as if you are an imposition, please know that you are not,” Hannibal said, offering him a warm look. Will crossed his legs where he sat, glancing up at the other briefly before looking back at the fire. He sipped his whiskey, choosing silence over a response. Hannibal reached over and gently moved a curl away from Will’s forehead, smiling to himself when the other didn’t back away. “However, you are not required to be here, Will. My home is open to you and you may spend as much or as little time here as you desire.”

Will chuckled quietly, finally looking over at Hannibal fully, looking him in the eyes. “That’s why I might go home. I’m afraid I’ll never leave if I don’t.”

“You are welcome to never leave,” Hannibal told him, laughing softly himself. Will elbowed him jokingly, smiling that real smile he seemed to only reserve for him and his dogs. Hannibal basked in its beauty, in Will’s comfort and happiness.

“I’ve gotta get my dogs back from Alana eventually. Plus, there’s no river in your back yard,” Will said, still smiling, but looking once again at the fire. Hannibal finished his whiskey and set his glass off to the side, then laid back to bask in the warmth of the fireplace. Will glanced

down at him, looking as if he thought that was a good idea, and he did the same. Hannibal smiled at him and Will huffed another quiet laugh. “I never thought I’d see the prim and proper Dr. Lecter laying on the floor.”

“It is another image to add to your collection. First, lumberjack Hannibal. Now, floor Hannibal,” Hannibal teased. He let out a contented sigh and finally looked away from Will, up towards the ceiling. He could feel Will still looking at him, seeing him. He allowed it, for himself to relax, to take some of his own guards down. “I keep a hearth as warmth is important to me. I often find it is easier to access deeper rooms of my memory palace with the scent of fire, and it allows me to bypass a time in which I suffered a profound loss.”

Will was quiet. Hannibal closed his eyes, allowing himself to focus on his sense of smell rather than sight. The mix of Will, of fire, of whiskey, his books were calming, enjoyable. He felt the other’s hand bump into his gently, and he lifted his to allow Will to slide his hand under. They intertwined fingers. Hannibal squeezed gently. They laid there together, warmed by the fire, bellies full. It was truly peace.

“Fires remind me of camping,” Will said eventually. “It was the only kind of vacation my dad could afford. Mostly on state land where we could camp for free.”

“Your trips were enjoyable?” Hannibal asked, eyes still closed, hand still tight around Will’s.

“Yeah,” he said. “I assume you vacationed?”

Hannibal hummed an assent. “We had a summer home in the mountains, where we were held to a less strict standard of behavior.”

“We?”

“My sister, Mischa, and I” Hannibal admitted. He rolled his head to the side and opened his eyes, to see Will was still watching him. He smiled softly. Will mirrored him.

“Your profound loss?” Will asked. He nodded. Will squeezed his hand once more and Hannibal brought Will’s hand to his mouth to press a kiss to his knuckles. “Will you tell me about her?”

“In time,” Hannibal said. He laid another kiss and another along the other’s knuckles. When Will was ready, he would tell him and he would be free to disclose each detail without Will’s rejection. The buzz of Will’s phone caught his attention and he looked at him, raising his eyebrows. Will frowned and fished in his pocket for it, sighing once he saw who it was. He showed Hannibal the screen. It was Jack.

“Hold on,” Will said with frustration. He answered it, shoving the phone against his ear. “Yeah?”

Hannibal listened carefully, trying to make out what the man on the other line was saying. Between the fire and Will’s ‘uh huhs,’ it was difficult, but he could hear frustration in the man’s voice. Perhaps it was a new case, one they felt they needed Will’s help on. If that were

true, Hannibal would call Jack back, he would reiterate his threat to go above Jack's head to someone higher in the chain of command.

Will hung the phone up and tossed it to the side, just out of reach. "Abel Gideon's transport van went missing. His lawyer reported him missing when he didn't show up at the new hospital and he's throwing a fit. Jack wants me to be careful since Gideon might be coming after the people who got him sent back to prison."

"The man is paralyzed, Will," Hannibal pointed out.

"Working theory is it was one of the employees from the BSHCI. Gideon got into his head, talked him into helping him," Will said as he sat up. He rubbed his face and then stood. Hannibal stood as well, leaning down to collect their discarded glasses. "I'm gonna go to bed."

"Have you taken your medications?"

"No," he admitted.

Hannibal gave him a stern look, then left the room, making his way to the kitchen. He was glad it would be easier and more timely to sedate Will this time, with no need to talk him into finishing a drink or convincing him he missed a pill. After depositing their empty whiskey glasses in the sink, he poured a cup of water and opened the drawer he had been keeping the other's medications in and counted out his nightly doses. He added a benzodiazepine to the small handful of pills, then made his way back to Will. Hannibal handed them off and Will took them, tossing them into his mouth and accepting the glass of water to swallow them down.

"Goodnight, Will," Hannibal said with a soft smile. He was rewarded with a mumbled goodnight of his own, and he stood watching as the other retreated from the room. After noting the time, he turned and made his way to the kitchen to wash their two glasses. It wouldn't do to leave them there and he had some time to waste until Will would be sound asleep. If he was correct in his assumptions, he would have a busy night ahead of him and there was no reason to alert Will to his potential absence.

praesemino

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 03:23

He had been there before, sitting in the dark, the cold metal of his gun feeling like fire in his hand. The man he was after would be there soon, so he slunk down deeper into the shadows behind the passenger seat, listening for the sounds of footfalls crunching in the snow outside. He could hear them briefly before the driver's side door swung open and Abel Gideon threw himself into the seat. He cocked the gun, reaching out of the shadows to place the muzzle against the man's temple.

"Drive," Will commanded. No words left the other's mouth, not like they had done before, for Abel also had to know he had been there in another lifetime. The car engine roared to life and it swung into motion, the lights coming on only after they were far, far away from the others who continued to search the observatory in vain. Abel did not ask directions and Will did not offer them, but the car still pulled to a stop at their fated destination. Will shoved the gun harder against the man's head and he glanced in the rear view mirror to try and catch Will's gaze, but did as he knew he was told. The car was put into park and he slowly climbed out, hands held up at his shoulders, visible. Will reached behind himself, feeling for the door handle before finding it, letting himself out. He reaimed the gun at Abel's head.

"Walk," his second command. The man did, keeping his hands up in a display of surrender. Will followed a few paces behind. Up the steps, into the door that already laid open, awaiting their arrival. Snow drifted in the entrance, cold wind following them inside. Abel paused, but Will pressed the gun to the back of his head, stepping forward to force the man to continue on.

Leaves and twigs cracked beneath their feet, roots breaking up from underneath tile made the floor uneven, almost difficult to navigate. They stepped through the doorway to the dining room, where the herb wall had overgrown, trees sprouting from the planters, roots upsetting the ground and branches breaking through the drywall of the ceiling. Abel stepped over broken tiles, then lowered himself into a chair at the table, allowing Will an unburdened view of the room. Upon the table lay Frederick Chilton, his stomach held open by abdominal retractors, his head held still by latex gloved hands. Will walked forward, gaze dragging from the angry opening in his abdomen to the hands that steadied the panicking man, to the beast sitting at the head of the table. The stag's dark stare caught Will, made him freeze in his tracks. Its mouth opened and all Will could hear was the whispered sounds of its voice, words he could not understand but knew the meaning to.

Will had brought the stag his imposter and his reward was an invitation. An offering to join in its wickedness.

Moving closer to the table, he focused on how Chilton's eyes widened, how fear caused them to look wild. A tube shoved deep into his throat kept him from being able to speak, but Will knew by the pained sounds he made that he was pleading for help. The man tried to sit up, to move, but the hands holding him tightened, purpled the skin beneath their grip. Will instead

looked up to the stag, its black eyes devoid of all emotion. There was nothing to mirror, nothing to feel. Still it spoke to him, calming him, encouraging him. Commanding him to accept his offer.

Will reached forward, his fingertips making contact with the hot viscera of Chilton's body. That was all it took before he plunged his hand in deeper, feeling the heat, the slick of blood. He grasped at anything that he could hold, that wouldn't slide from his grip, and he pulled. The pained groans from the man on the table were hushed by a hand on his throat, making it easier for Will to do what he knew he had to do; he pulled, feeling resistance give way, and he freed a kidney from the bloody mess before him. His own eyes closed as he brought the organ to his mouth, taking in its coppery scent before he sunk his teeth in.

He gagged, coughing. Will rolled out of the bed, hitting the floor hard as he tried to retch up the kidney, the ear. It took him a few heavy breaths before he remembered where he was, that he was safe in Hannibal's guest room. He pulled himself up using the bed, sitting on it while he rubbed his face and pushed sweat slick curls back. He felt like shit, like he should vomit up whatever was in his stomach. After calming himself, he stood up, catching his balance with a hand on the side table as the room spun around him.

Instead of climbing back into bed, Will steadied himself to walk. If the stag man wouldn't comfort him tonight, he'd seek it out elsewhere. He closed his eyes until he felt like the room was done spinning, then started a slow walk to the doorway, to the hall. He used the wall to stay upright, dragging his hand along it until he reached Hannibal's room. He thought about knocking, but instead, he opened the door and carefully peered in. It didn't look like he was in bed yet, but it was hard to focus on anything. The world kept trying to sway, as if he were on a ship in choppy seas. Will turned around to go find him, to see if he was still downstairs in the study, but the hall spun. His stomach turned sour. He shut his eyes tight and counted, waiting until the world righted itself again. It was fine, he figured. Hannibal would just find him in his room whenever he came upstairs to bed.

Will stepped in and closed the door behind himself. A few steps later and he slid himself into the bed. He shut his eyes and took in a deep breath, surrounding himself with the scent of Hannibal, before he quickly fell back to sleep.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 08:45

When Hannibal arrived home in the early morning, Will was not where he left him. Will was in his bed instead, smelling of fear and anxiety. The man appeared to metabolize medications at a quicker rate than average, yet he awoke complaining that he felt hungover. He refused to speak about what had upset him during the night despite gentle prods for information. After feeling his forehead for fever and reassuring Will that he most likely was still feeling effects from his illness, Hannibal made him a light breakfast. He left Will at home, with promise of contacting specialists once again to see what the status of his appointments were. He had yet to actually contact anyone, but the decision was made that morning that he finally would. There was no reason now for Will to slip back into hallucinations, or worse.

That was a task for later, however. In the meantime, Hannibal sat patiently waiting in a small cafe near his office. He glanced at his watch, then scanned the doorway, the windows to the street for red hair. He sighted her. She was just in time for their rendezvous. She crossed the threshold and caught his eye. She gave him a smirk and started taking off her gloves as she made her way over.

“Dr. Lecter,” she greeted, seating herself opposite him at the table. He offered her a cordial smile.

“Miss Lounds,” he said.

“You were awfully cryptic about why you wanted to meet,” she said, settling in and setting her purse on the table between them. Hannibal paid it no mind; he knew she most likely had a recording device within, but he wouldn’t indicate that he was aware.

“I assumed you would be capable of making the connections,” Hannibal said cooly.

“Yes, well, if you asked me here to request that I stop writing about you or Graham, I’m afraid I’ll have to say no. Nothing I’ve written falls under libel and your consultation with the FBI means your public actions are of interest to my readers,” Freddie said with a smile.

“I have no qualms with your interest in Will and myself. However, it is awfully rude to break and enter,” Hannibal said as he pulled a recording device from his pocket. He had found it several days ago after Alana brought to his attention the journalist’s piqued interest in him. The device was set on the table next to Freddie’s purse, and before she could say anything else, he reached back into his pocket. He pulled out a small plastic bag that contained a long, curled red hair. He set it next to the recording device. Hannibal leveled his gaze with her, waiting for her excuse.

If her initial reaction was to deny the recording device was hers, the hair stopped her. He watched as she opened her mouth, then shut it again. She reached forward and snatched up the recorder, then pulled her purse into her lap and put it inside. She went to pick up the baggie, but Hannibal reached out to lay a finger on it, trapping it to the tabletop.

Freddie instead gave him a very fake, very innocent looking smile. “Dr. Lecter, I’m just doing my job.”

“While I can respect dedication to one’s craft, my clients’ right to privacy supersedes your suspicions of me,” he said, his tone firm, serious. “I will not report you, but I do ask that you refrain from entering my office illegally in the future. I am more than willing to sit down with you and answer any questions you might have.”

The woman let out a huffed short laugh and crossed her arms, leaning them on the table so she could lower her voice. “Dr. Lecter, would you care to explain why so many of your clients often commit violent crimes after being under your care?”

Hannibal picked up the bag containing her hair and tucked it back into his coat pocket. He studied her face, her attempt to rattle him, and then his own expression turned into a warm

smile. “Miss Lounds, I can only help my clients as much as they allow. The mind is complex and not all are receptive to change.”

“Then why would you choose to ignore Will Graham’s symptoms when he was clearly sick?” She pressed on.

He stood, adjusting his suit jacket to button it as he did. “My actions were always sincere with Will. You will have to attempt to contact Dr. Sutcliffe if you desire an answer as to why his illness was missed.”

Freddie offered him a fake laugh then stood as well, slinging her purse over her shoulder. “Can you at least tell me how Graham passed a psych eval in less than a week from his encephalitis diagnosis and his return from the Chesapeake Ripper? It seems like I’m the only person seeing every red flag.”

“It seems that there are parties involved in Will’s life that do not have his best interest at heart,” Hannibal said, with genuine concern. He turned to leave, then paused, looking back at her. “I believe you may want to interview Dr. Frederick Chilton.”

Hannibal offered her a polite nod, then turned and made his exit from the cafe. He had to meet with a client, schedule follow up appointments for Will, and take time to clear some of his afternoons. He briefly considered calling Will to check on him, to see if he was feeling any better, but he refrained. They would see one another later that evening.

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; TUESDAY, 10:28

Will had left the house shortly after Hannibal left. He didn’t want to be there alone, not without any work to keep him occupied, not without distraction. Instead, he shot Alana a quick text saying he was going to take the dogs fishing, got himself ready, and left to drive himself to Wolf Trap. Alana left her spare key under the mat for him, so picking the pack up had been a quick task before he made his way to his own home. He let them run around the yard, more for his own peace of mind, knowing that they would alert him to any presence that wasn’t welcome. When they didn’t seem too interested in anything in particular, he set out to get his fishing gear from his shed.

It was a peaceful walk through the late fall woods. Some trees had dropped all of their leaves, others held on to their yellows and reds. It was beautiful and allowed the sun to reach through the treetops to warm him in the cool air. He was almost able to pretend things were back to normal, that Jack had never walked into his classroom to ask for help with the yet-named Minnesota Shrike case, that he was just on a break from teaching to tend to his mental health. Although, if Jack had never shown up that day, he never would have met Hannibal. As used to being alone as he was, it would be a difficult transition to a life without him again.

With a sigh, he cleared his thoughts. He was there to fish, to calm himself.

He sat his bag at the shoreline; he hadn’t gone through his fishing gear since the day he got them back from the evidence locker. It had seemed like a task too big to handle, but he was

out there now, with no distractions and no excuse not to. He kneeled down, taking a moment to pet Winston and Zoe who came trotting over when they saw him lower to the ground. Once they were satisfied with the attention and wandered off, he took a deep breath and pulled his tacklebox out. It still had evidence tape on it, although it had been cut when it was examined by the lab. Will sighed, popping the box open. At least half of his flies were gone. The rest were packed in small, labeled bags. He frowned to himself and just selected a random bag, ripping it open and pulling the three flies within out. They would do.

One surgeon's knot later and Will was casting, choosing to stay on the shore rather than wade into the water. The water was colder than he preferred, and he'd stay warmer this way.

Will allowed his mind to wander then, finally. He first thought of his home, his possessions, wrapped in bags, taped, labeled, and how angry it made him to know he was cast aside so quickly, believed to be a murderer. It was one reason he didn't like being at his house; it still felt violated, not only by the Chesapeake Ripper, but by his own colleagues. Then Abigail… She had been scared of him, the last time he remembered seeing her. Telling him something was wrong with him. There was, and yet he was stubbornly choosing to sacrifice his own self for every person around him who wouldn't do the same for him. Had he just chosen to stay in the hospital after he collapsed, had he actually gotten better, maybe people would have believed him when he was being framed. Maybe he wouldn't have pushed Abigail so hard, maybe she would have stayed in the care home and the Ripper never would have gotten her.

He couldn't even recall why it was so goddamned important to him to have her admit she helped, that she lured the other girls.

She was just trying to survive her father.

Will realized he'd been zoning out and he whistled for the dogs. They came trotting and he counted them, making sure they were all present and accounted for. He pulled his line in, not a single bite later, and set the rod down next to his bag. He sat on the ground, glad for Buster when he got into his lap, and he just stared out at the flowing water. It could have been nice, had he not been so sick, had Abigail been safe. He could have helped her to have at least a few years of normalcy, learning to fish, to go to school in a town no one knew her, making friends that wouldn't know what she'd done. Instead, he damned her to the same fate her real father had, only by different hands.

His phone buzzed. Will dug around in his bag for it and pulled it out. It was a text from Hannibal informing him that he had a neurologist appointment on Thursday and a nephrologist appointment on Friday, and a request from Hannibal for him to call the hospital and add permission for his medical records to be released to both physicians and Hannibal. He'd do it later, when he got back home.

Just as he was about to put his phone away, it rang. It was Jack. Will tossed the phone into his bag anyway and went back to watching the river. The second time it rang, he pulled it back out and stared at the screen, contemplating whether or not to answer it. He didn't.

It rang a third time.

He answered, "What?"

“Will. I know I told you to take time off, but he’s completed the sounder,” Jack said. For what it was worth, Will realized that he sounded conflicted.

“You’re sure it’s the Ripper?”

“Pretty damn sure,” Jack sighed. “And we found Gideon.”

“The Ripper took him?” Will asked.

“And displayed him. I’ll send you the address,” he said, then the line went dead.

A moment later a text from Jack came through. Will stared at it. The address Jack sent was back in Baltimore, meaning he wouldn’t get there for a few hours. It gave him time to call Hannibal, to see if he’d be able to come with him. He could barely handle the last crime scene, and if this was genuinely the Chesapeake Ripper, he had no idea if he’d be capable of handling it on his own. He moved Buster out of his lap and stood, gathering up his bag and fishing rod. He whistled for the dogs, then he began a slow trek through the woods back to his house. He’d leave the dogs there and let Alana know where to pick them up. Thankfully he had a long walk ahead of him to figure out what excuse he could give her so she wouldn’t know he was walking back into a crime scene without even attempting to call any of the other psychiatrists she asked him to contact.

deveneror

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 14:02

Will came to a stop just down the street from the crime scene. The road was blocked off, the sidewalk lined with police tape, and a small crowd of onlookers had gathered just outside the line. Past them, Will could see marked FBI vans, a few familiar cars, people. He put his car in park and got out, scanning the crowd of workers until he caught sight of Jack, his back turned, speaking to Hannibal. Will took in a deep breath, shut his car door, and walked towards the scene. He flashed his badge at the cop by the police tape, who lifted it up to let him in. He ducked under it, then made a beeline for the two familiar faces in the sea of agents.

To say he wasn't looking forward to viewing the last tableau of the Ripper's sounder was an understatement. Will could feel his stomach tightening, his nerves prickling the very edges of him. It was such an unfamiliar feeling, which made him more aware of the change in his own behavior; up until he woke up in that hospital, he could look at any crime scene, no matter how gruesome, and analyze it with a clinical detachment. They were puzzles to be solved, a necessary process to catch the perpetrators and to add to the repertoire of profiling to make future killers more predictable. Will missed the simplicity of analyzing crime scenes from the view of an investigator or the killer without his fears taking over.

Hannibal saw him first as he approached, stepping slightly to the side to be fully visible to Will. Jack turned, his face grim as he greeted the younger man. Hannibal seemed as calm and collected as ever, as if he were about to walk into an opera house rather than a crime scene. It was calming.

"Will," Jack reached out and patted him on his upper back. Will just pulled his lips back to mimic a smile in lieu of saying hello. "I'll have the church cleared out before you go in. Stay here."

Jack headed off, his commanding voice booming instructions as he made his way in the door of the building. Will looked up at Hannibal, who was watching him with a quiet sort of curiosity. He looked away, towards the church.

"Thank you," Will muttered. Hannibal stepped closer to him, resting a hand on his lower back as he began guiding Will towards the church.

"While you know my opinion on your early return to the field, I am glad you contacted me. I will be here with you throughout the whole process, and I will stop you if I feel it is necessary," Hannibal said, using the same detached tone he often used during therapy sessions. Will didn't want it to help, but it did. "I will keep you safe."

They stopped near the entranceway, waiting as techs and agents filed out of the building. Jack appeared moments later, motioning for them to join him inside. Will felt a surge of panic hit him and he realized then he should have been preparing himself, he should have reviewed his own tableau, Abigail's. The hand on his back pressed harder, a grounding touch, and he

looked up. Hannibal was staring down at him, still curious, still calm. Will stepped inside the church.

“I’ll wait here,” Jack said, his own voice neutral, as he stood just shy of the doorway. Will could tell he was being careful, that whatever Hannibal had said to him had an effect. Perhaps he was being careful only because Hannibal was present.

Will had half a mind to dip his fingertips into the stoup of holy water as he passed it, to bless himself, but it was just an old superstition clawing its way back up as his anxiety screamed at him. It was a small church, Roman Catholic, brick on the outside, the inside covered with bright white plastered walls. It was barren of stained-glass windows, instead along the walls hung murals of the Twelve Steps of the Covenant on the windowless walls. Everything was illuminated by artificial light. Pews on either side of the room lined an aisle that led to the altar, where a lone figure kneeled at the base, propped up by saplings. In front of the kneeling figure stood a crucifix, not of Jesus, but of another body.

He walked forward down the aisle, Hannibal at his side. Once he reached the last pew, he felt the other’s hand fall away from his lower back, his tether to reality cut. Will took a deep breath.

Rounding the figure, Will realized the man in prayer was Abel Gideon. He was posed, kneeling on both knees, two saplings with yellowed leaves in use to hold him up. The branches veered off to either side of him, the leaves looking as if Gideon had feathered wings. A third sapling, stripped to nothing but bark, was used to bind the man’s hands, to keep them up in front of his chest as if in prayer. His stomach was flayed open, rough cuts that spilled his insides out onto the floor before his knees, soaking into the cheap pink carpeting, creating a dark red circle around the man’s body. His face was upturned, eyes closed and mouth slightly open, lips torn where they had been chapped. He looked almost reverent.

Will stepped in front of Gideon, facing the crucifix, to see what the man was damned to pray to. To see the man nailed to the cross above the altar. He was not adorned with a crown of thorns nor was his side split. His body was nude, no shroud, nothing to hide him from the world. He had no injuries that Will could see beyond the nails driven through his wrists and ankles. This man was not a placeholder for Jesus, but something else to be worshipped. Something about his display didn’t fit with Gideon’s. Something was wrong.

“He doesn’t belong,” Will said aloud. He stepped forward, turning so that he could walk backwards onto the altar, to view Gideon and Gideon only. Hannibal stood beyond, watching. Jack was farther, still at his post by the door.

Will closed his eyes. The pendulum swung.

The lights dimmed and the men disappeared. Gideon laid on the floor, alive, mouth taped shut. Another swing of the pendulum, and Will was in the place of the killer. He dragged Gideon to the center of the base of the altar.

“Stay where I put you,” he laughed at the man, who would be unable to do much with his useless legs. Supplies for his display sat piled at the foot of the altar, but they were foreign to

him, as if left there by another. Saplings, rope, tape, a knife. A saw. Will picked up the saplings, running his fingers through the brittle leaves, before he realized what they were meant for. “I am meant to give you wings. You are meant to repent for your sins, to lay down before God asking for forgiveness.”

It wasn’t easy work, forcing a struggling, mostly dead weight Gideon into a kneeling position. His body was bound to two saplings with rope, the branches that would touch in the center cut away so that only the outside branches remained, to give him golden wings. The third sapling Will spent time sharpening with the saw, creating a point before setting it in front of Gideon. It was a threat that if he threw himself forward one last time, he would impale himself. Wrists were bound, his hands taped together in prayer around the sapling. He was propped up now, as if in a tripod, free to kneel on its own without Will’s support. Will kneeled in front of Gideon and ripped the tape from his mouth.

“I offer you as my sacrifice. My penance for borrowing the name you callously stole,” he said as he sunk his knife into soft flesh and he ripped down, uncaring of what organs he pierced. He watched as blood began to sputter from the man’s mouth as he gasped, each cough splattering Will’s face and chest with droplets of blood. He did not care. Once more, he plunged the knife in, but he felt the blade pierce his own flesh. Before him stood a man, whose face changed, from Gideon’s, to Abigail’s, to Hobbs as it drove the knife in a third time, dragging it down and down until he could feel his innards spilling. Will tried to grab hold of them, to push them back inside, but his hands were bound to the sapling. Behind the shifting body stood the stag man, looming over them both, its gaze approving of the scene before it. It held a hand out, Hobbs copying the action, and they echoed one another, asking if Will could see.

Will wanted to cry out and ask it why it wasn’t helping, why it was allowing this now. His knees soaked with his own blood and he struggled, knocking the sapling his hands were bound to over. He tried desperately to get his hands to his stomach, to push his innards back inside, but he couldn’t without piercing his own flesh with the sharpened end.

“Will,” a firm voice called out. He looked around, the room brighter than before. A hand grabbed his arm, and Will went to push it off, only to realize it was Hannibal who was touching him. His own hands were trembling, pale. “Will, can you hear me?”

He drew in a shaky breath. Then another. A third. “Yeah. I can.”

“What did you see?” Jack was there too, no longer at the door, but close by as if he’d need to catch him if he ran. Will glanced at him, then at Hannibal, seeing a hint of annoyance on his face at the man immediately asking about the scene. Will stepped away from the two.

“It wasn’t the Ripper. It was done *for* the Ripper,” Will said. He turned to stare up at the crucified body. It hadn’t been there when Gideon was killed, he was sure of that. Will wanted to leave. “And this was a gift.”

“Gideon was killed for the Ripper and he just threw in a bonus body?” Jack asked, wanting clarification.

“Either a thank you for allowing him to be the Ripper for one kill, or he’s showing off. Showing that he’s capable of his own work, not for us, but for the Ripper’s approval,” Will replied. He rubbed his hands on his thighs, trying to steady them. He felt ill like he had that morning, but without the room spinning. “Did he leave all the organs?”

“It is hard to tell without a proper autopsy, but it does appear that they were left as intact as possible given the means of disembowelment,” Hannibal said, stepping away from Will and circling Gideon’s body to look for himself. Will watched as he stopped on the other side of Gideon and turned to peer up at the crucifix, a blank look on his face. He was unreadable.

Will turned to Jack. “He gave him wings. But he’s set in a position of worship, or asking forgiveness. Not an angel.”

“Do you think it’s your hawk?” Jack asked, leveling Will with a dour stare.

“He sure has faith now, Jack,” Will said, shoving his hands into his jacket pockets. They wouldn’t stop shaking. His stomach turned over itself. “The only question is, who is he praying to?”

Jack heaved a sigh, turning away from the two. He walked off to call in the techs again. Will looked back at Hannibal, who stood calmly by the altar, hands balled into fists at his side as he took in the body on the cross. Will walked over to him, leaving a wide berth between himself and Gideon’s body. He stood behind the other man, almost close enough for their shoulders to touch. He wanted the comfort.

“Crucifixion was not a punishment levied solely onto Jesus Christ,” Hannibal said, looking away from the cross to Will. “But often he is the only one prayed to, if you do not consider prayers to crucified saints. This is a failed analogy. Our killer is unable to delve beneath the surface imagery to the true meaning.”

“He’s young? Less educated? Less experienced?” Will asked. He knew the answers already. Hannibal nodded a yes anyway. Will allowed himself to lean his shoulder against Hannibal’s. The taller man shifted, instead wrapping his arm around Will and inviting him to lean against his body. They gazed up at the crucifix again, Will studying the out of place display. “No ligature marks around the neck, no signs of petechiae, no swollen lips, so he wasn’t strangled or suffocated. No apparent external wounds other than his wrists and ankles. Unless there’s wounds on his back, then he was probably drugged.”

“We’ll confirm it with toxicology,” Bev replied. She had entered at Jack’s beckoning, and she walked down the aisle between the pews, weighed down on one side by her forensics bag. “But compared to our wanna-be Ripper here, Jesus looks like he got off pretty easy.”

“Break it up, love birds. It’s disrespectful to the Lord,” Jimmy said, close behind Bev and followed by a few others Will didn’t know by name.

“Like this whole crime scene isn’t an affront,” Will muttered. He went to step away from Hannibal, who squeezed him just enough to stop him. He stayed put.

“I suppose it would be hypocritical of me to judge a same sex couple,” Jimmy laughed.

“So she *was* right,” Bev said, smirking at Will. He stiffened, looking away from her. Hannibal allowed his hand to drop and for Will put space between them.

“Alright, alright. Get back to work. Will, Hannibal,” Jack motioned for them to meet him near the doorway. Bev waved at them, then set to work with Jimmy placing number placards, swabbing, taking photographs as more techs flooded back into the building. Will was the first to walk to Jack, Hannibal lingering behind to study the crucifixion a little longer. He joined them though, a few steps behind the profiler.

“Have you found the van?” Will asked.

“No,” Jack said.

“I assume we don’t know yet if it was an inside job or if someone hijacked the van,” Will said with a frown. He turned away from Jack, staring at the agents and techs picking apart the scene, readying the victims for their transport to the lab. It was easier to look now that there was distance between him and the bodies.

“We tracked the van as far as Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. They hopped off the main highway in Harrisburg, not sure why. It’s almost a straight shot north from here to Danville,” Jack informed them. “We’ve yet to track the van coming back down. Whoever drove it back knew to avoid common routes. We’re setting up a grid to check cameras along all the roads back.”

“May I ask who had knowledge of Dr. Gideon’s destination?” Hannibal asked, that calm curiosity back in his voice.

“It’s a short list,” Jack said with a sigh. “Seems like we’re looking at an inside job. No one’s seen the nurse, driver, or guard since Gideon’s disappearance, but we aren’t ruling any of them out as suspects. Dr. Chilton is sending over a list of BSHCI employees that were involved in any way with Gideon’s transport.”

“No ID on the cross victim?” Will asked. Jack shook his head no. Will took a deep breath and nodded, stepping past the man into the daylight. He turned around, walking backwards to say to Jack, “I would be willing to bet he’s one of the missing employees and that one of the others is our suspect. No defensive wounds. He knew the killer. I’ll work on my report at home. I’ll send it to you when I’m done.”

He watched as the other two men gave one another a short, not-quite-friendly farewell, then Hannibal followed him out. Will stopped at the sidewalk, not quite at the police tape. Once the other caught up to him, he offered him a pained smile. It was the best he could do.

“Thank you. For being here,” Will said, glancing up to see him, to read him. To make sure it was okay that he had called him to come.

Hannibal smiled at him, a soft one that didn’t wrinkle the lines around his eyes, but they lit up anyway. “There is no need to thank me. I am and will always be willing to go anywhere for you if you need me. Will you be honoring your appointment this evening?”

Will nodded a few times, looking away, back to the building. Back at the crime scene. It would be good to get back into the routine, to talk about crime scenes, how he was handling them. “Yeah. I’ll be there.”

In lieu of a goodbye, Hannibal reached out to take Will’s hand. He lifted it to his lips and kissed his knuckles, and it caused his face to flush, hot and red. He pulled his hand away, as much as he didn’t want to, but they were surrounded by FBI agents. Dead bodies were just beyond the door. He looked away from the man and turned, heading back to his car. He could feel Hannibal staring at him as he retreated, but it was good, like he was being watched over. Will got into his car and pulled away from the curb. He’d go home to Hannibal’s for now. He would work on his report. He’d wait for more information to come through as they uncovered who the crucified man was, or if they find the other people who’d been in the van with Gideon. He would busy himself until it was time to meet Hannibal at his office.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 19:00

As he expected, Will found it was nice to return to a routine he knew well. He stood in the waiting room of Hannibal’s practice, coat draped over one arm, the other hand in his pocket, not facing the door so he wouldn’t seem too eager to walk back into that room. Brief memories of the coat rack falling, a manifestation of Marissa Schurr, of dropping a whiskey glass flitted across his mind, but he pushed them away. Those days are gone. He’s doing better. He’s been taking his medications. He hasn’t been hallucinating.

The door opened, right on time. Hannibal stood with his usual grace, a pleasant smile on his face.

“Hello, Will. Come in,” he said, practiced. Easy.

“Dr. Lecter,” Will said as he turned and smiled at him, focusing on the man’s tie rather than looking him in the eye. He didn’t want to know if Hannibal would have a different look in his eyes; he wanted this to be familiar as he stepped past the man, as the door clicked shut, as his coat was gently coaxed from his hand and hung up. Will made a slow circle around the room, still undecided whether he would prefer sitting, standing, or leaning against Hannibal’s desk.

Hannibal made the decision for him, seating himself in his usual chair. Will glanced at him, watching as he settled and crossed his legs, then he slowly made his own way over to his place across from the other. He sat. He gripped the arms of his chair. He flicked his gaze up to meet Hannibal’s eyes. Measured, calm. Lightly curious. Just as Will had hoped.

“What’s on your mind tonight, Will?” Hannibal asked once he had allowed enough time to pass, once Will didn’t break the silence for them.

“Where things end,” he said, almost to his own surprise. His own thoughts hadn’t been that succinct, instead a whirling frenzy between his odd dreams, his anxieties over his own tableau, of his failing Abigail, of who would be trying to win over the Ripper’s approval and what they would be willing to do to get it. Will took in a deep breath, preparing for Hannibal’s response.

“A very open-ended statement,” Hannibal said, then paused to consider Will for a moment. “Often and in many words, endings are described only as beginnings.”

“Everything has to come to an end, sometime,” Will quoted *The Marvelous Land of Oz* rather than giving a genuine answer. The other man waited, stretching the silence out until Will felt he needed to fill it, to explain. He frowned and looked away from him, up along the walls of books above him, to a piece of art on the wall. “I dreamt of the stag man again, last night.”

“Is that why you sought me out?” Hannibal asked.

Will nodded, a slow, unsure dip of his chin. He huffed a laugh before rubbing his face, then resting his chin in his hand, elbow on the arm of the chair. He refused to look at Hannibal. “The dream started when I was back in Gideon’s car, sick and angry. I remember … parts of that night. Of sitting in his car, forcing him to drive. I lost time, between then and shooting him. But in my dream, I brought him to your house.”

The man opposite from him tilted his head, minutely, but enough Will noticed in his peripherals. He turned his attention back to Hannibal, whose curiosity was stronger, eager to know more, so Will continued. “I walked him into your home, to your dining room. The stag man was there, seated at the head of your table, with Chilton laid out as he had been the night Gideon had him. It wanted me to … to *feast*.”

“And did you?” Hannibal inquired, accent thick, interest piqued. Will nodded again, ripping his gaze away from the man. “Was the feast to your liking?”

He shook his head, then once again rubbed his face, his mouth with his hands before he looked up at the ceiling. “I woke up gagging like I was throwing up Abigail’s ear again. I’m worried that, that I still haven’t let Hobbs go. That there’s no closure.”

“No end,” Hannibal added when Will paused.

“No end,” Will confirmed. “Then I think, could she have had an end? Could she have put her past behind her and lived a normal life? If I hadn’t been sick, if I hadn’t been so obsessed with learning her role in her father’s crimes… If I didn’t need to force her to admit she actively participated--”

“Will,” the other cut in. Will looked at him, then Hannibal continued, “Perhaps I should have asked this many weeks ago. When you were a child, did you join your father in his hobbies?”

After a pause, Will answered, “Yes.”

“Abigail was no different. The first people we emulate as children are our caregivers. Not only is it a tool to learn, but it is a survival skill, to endear us to those who hold our lives in their hands. Had Abigail chosen to rebel, she may have saved the lives of several others, but she would have sacrificed her own. You cannot fault a person for choosing their own survival,” Hannibal said, his tone firm and authoritative. “Perhaps your concern for Abigail is projection. Analyzing her chance of recovery after a traumatic experience is easier than analyzing your own.”

Will stood up out of his chair. He stared at Hannibal for a long moment before he turned, walking towards the windows. To look outside, to shut the room out. He heard the other stand, follow him to the window. Hannibal was right, but he didn't want to face him, he didn't want to admit that it was hard to consider his own life. It had never been easy, but now?

Will reached out and moved the sheer curtain out of the way, out of his line of vision so he could look out into the night. Hannibal crowded close to him from behind, sliding his arms around Will's waist, pulling him back against him. He didn't speak, nor did he prompt Will to respond to him. They simply stood together, Will eventually leaning himself back against Hannibal, accepting the contact.

"I still can't look at my own case," Will admitted, after a long while of watching the empty street outside. "If I can't look at my own case, then I might not be able to stop the third in his sounder. Gideon wasn't it. Gideon's display was sloppy, but … guided. The Ripper wanted it done, but he'll be angry over how sloppy the kill was. And the addition."

Hannibal merely hummed an agreeing sound. He pressed a gentle kiss to the side of Will's head, then he broke their contact. Will turned, watching as the other strolled across the room to the coat rack. He followed him, accepting his coat after Hannibal had put his own on.

"You will be able to analyze your own case when you are ready. However," Hannibal said with a smile as he smoothed Will's coat lapels down once he'd helped him into it, "our time this evening is up. Shall we go home and enjoy a meal together?"

They headed out the door together, Will waiting while Hannibal flipped the lights off and locked up. Walking out into the night, they made their way to their own cars. Will felt better now that he was able to talk to Hannibal about things that had been bothering him. More organized than he had felt all day. A good meal and a glass of wine would do him some good too, and he decided that he'd stay downstairs with Hannibal into the night while he worked on his report for Jack and the other sketched, or read, or refined his damn menu for the dinner party for the millionth time.

scisco

BSHCI, BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; WEDNESDAY, 07:47

It was dreary, cold. Rainy. Frederick Chilton sat in his car, staring at the drab grey of the drab building against the drab sky. This week was supposed to be easy. Gideon-free. No more daily reminder that he had been accused of psychic manipulation, that the accuser had broken out and acted out to prove a point. An insane point, but a point that meant people would talk. Scrutinize. Assume and question. Instead, the euphoria of Monday morning came crashing down around him in the evening, when Gideon's blood sucker of a lawyer called, angry, demanding to know where his client was. That phone call led to several unanswered calls to the driver, to the guard, to the nurse (who had frustratingly followed protocol and left his cell phone in his locker, no less!). The dispatch for the transportation company tried to radio the driver, who never answered. Hours later, the Federal Bureau of Investigation was all over his office, the HR office, Gideon's empty cell, and all over the building interviewing employees. They assumed Gideon had escaped a second time with help.

Thankfully, he hadn't. When Jack Crawford called him to inform him that Gideon had been found *dead*, Frederick was elated. He tamped that feeling down however, and instead showed grave concern because it meant his employees and the driver of the transport van were in danger, or worse! They could be in cahoots with Gideon's killer. He expected that there would be more agents at his hospital by mid-morning today, interviewing employees again, reviewing more camera footage, asking more questions.

If only he had gone into private practice, he could have avoided this entire mess.

With a frown, and dread for the day to come, he gathered up his suitcase, cane, and umbrella, then threw open his car door. He'd get through today. He'd go home and have as much to drink as his single kidney would allow. He'd come back to work tomorrow. By next Monday, the FBI should leave him be. This was clearly a case of the real Chesapeake Ripper getting even with the man who stole his reputation, and there was nothing he nor his employees could have done to prevent it from happening eventually. The only way it could have been avoided would have been if Gideon kept himself holed up in his cell. It was his fault, honestly, for getting the idea that he could sue and get himself better accommodations for his lifelong sentence.

"Good morning, Dr. Chilton," a woman's voice made him jump as he got out of his car. He turned to see that it was that Freddie Lounds woman standing near him under her own umbrella. He gave her a sneer of a fake smile and opened his umbrella to cover himself from the rain, turning to walk into the building. He heard her heels hitting the ground fast as she caught up to him. "I'm sorry to bother you so early in the morning. I promise you though, this isn't about Abel Gideon."

Those words made him pause. He stopped walking and turned to look at her, allowing her to catch up. "Go on."

“It’s about Will Graham,” she said, holding a recorder out and wiggling it in what appeared to be an enticing way.

“Ah,” his face fell. He supposed Graham was a better subject than Gideon, but it really, truly depended on what she wanted to know. Frederick began walking towards the building again, cane hitting the ground hard in his frustration. “What about Mr. Graham?”

“I’ve put in a FOIA request in regard to his return to the field after his kidnapping, so whatever you withhold, I will find out,” Freddie said with a sweet smile. “However, I heard from a relatively reliable source that *you* had the honor of signing off on his psych eval. Is this true?”

“No reason to lie, is there?” Frederick sighed. “Yes. And before you ask, he’s perfectly sane, regardless of his empathy disorder and possible placement on the spectrum. I understand you have some … *vendetta* against him, but the man was sick. Physically. He’s been cured.”

“No vendettas here. I just seek the truth,” she said as she rounded him to cut him off. “You’ve had some controversy recently regarding your treatment of patients, including the recently deceased who viciously attacked you. Is it possible that Graham could have seen the pattern in your techniques and manipulated you into believing him to be sane?”

With another fake smile, he stepped around her to continue walking. They were almost to the building. He damned the old hospital for having such a long distance between employee parking and the entrance. “Miss Lounds, he is not some *master manipulator*. You’ve heard the things he’s said directly to you that you have reported in your very own articles. If he can’t hold his tongue with a tabloid reporter, do you honestly think he could navigate a line of questioning by a trained psychiatrist aimed at determining his mental status?”

“If he is perfectly fine, can you explain to me why he panicked, ran from a crime scene, and hid long enough that the FBI sent out a search party to look for him?” She asked. “Either he manipulated you or you are a very bad psychiatrist, Dr. Chilton.”

This time, Frederick stopped walking on his own. He squared his shoulders and drew himself up, confident. She had no right to learn that he hadn’t actually evaluated Will and no right to insinuate that he was not good at his job, at his life’s work, at his passion. “Miss Lounds, my various accolades, peer reviewed published papers, degrees, and reputation can answer your questions. One narcissistic psychopath latching onto an idea that got him killed cannot erase literal decades of good psychiatric care. Mr. Graham has an empathy disorder and he works in a field that can affect even the most hardened agents. Now if you will excuse me, I have a crisis to manage.”

With that, he turned away from her, away from her smug smile and hurried to make his way inside. To his surprise and relief, she didn’t follow him any farther than that. Whatever she wanted to know, she either got or knew he would be no help, which suited him fine. He badged himself into the employee entrance and stepped inside, shaking his wet umbrella off before bringing it inside with him. He pulled the door shut, looking out the window at the woman walking away, huddled under her own, godawfully bright red umbrella. There was no way she would find out from Will Graham or Hannibal Lecter that he had not performed a proper evaluation. He trusted neither would tell. Graham wouldn’t say anything because he

wouldn't want to be reevaluated, and Lecter wouldn't because he himself understood that sometimes, paperwork and bureaucracy were often detrimental to desired outcomes.

Frederick sighed. At least she had gotten his mind off of this whole Gideon fiasco for five minutes.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; WEDNESDAY, 09:28

"Whoever killed Dr. Gideon," Jimmy started, then made a long whistle to emphasize his point. "They *enjoyed* it."

"There are no defensive wounds, which means Gideon either didn't have the chance to or physically couldn't fight back," Brian said, glancing up at Will and Jack, who stood off to the side out of the way. "He has deep lacerations on both of his wrists, but he was bound so tightly to the sapling that it's likely we won't know if he had any marks from when he was alive and cuffed to the bed. He was disemboweled while alive."

"His cause of death, and it was not surgically precise," Jimmy added. He pointed along the edges of Gideon's abdomen, where the flesh had been cut. "You can see the tearing in some places along the incisions with the naked eye. Whoever our killer is used a dull blade and he did not cut quickly. He either struggled or cut slowly on purpose."

"So Will was right. It wasn't our Ripper," Jack said with a frown. He crossed his arms over his chest and leaned in to look at where Jimmy was pointing.

"No. There was also a full accounting of Gideon's organs. Nothing was taken," Brian said as he pulled his gloves off. He walked over to a counter and picked up his autopsy report, then held it out for Jack to take. He did, opening it up to scan over it.

"What do you think he does with the organs?" Jimmy asked, turning his attention to Will. "If this guy was trying to impress the Ripper, wouldn't he take some? Try to gift them to him like Gideon did?"

"He wasn't trying to impress him with Gideon. He was following orders," Will said, pulling himself out of his own thoughts. "He had instructions. He set Gideon up in a way that is too complex for our killer's own thought process. If he was working alone, the second body would have had more mutilation, more flair. More artistry that matched Gideon's body. The second body is a bad imitation."

"That doesn't answer why he didn't remove organs," Jack pointed out, despite still reading the autopsy report.

"Nothing was taken from either body?" Will asked.

"No," Jimmy and Brian answered simultaneously.

With a nod, Will filed that information away for later consideration. There was a reason, but it could be anywhere from the Ripper changing his MO to disguise his assisting the unknown

killer to him believing Gideon's loss of his legs was punishment enough. There would be something that would point Will to the right answer, either in his or Abigail's display, his third and upcoming tableau, or even in the copycat murders. "And the crucified victim?"

"He was ID'd as Patrick Sullivan, the armed guard that was in the transport van. Toxicology confirmed he was drugged. He had both haloperidol and promethazine in his system in extremely high quantities. Overdose was his likely cause of death, and I found three separate injection sites. One in his neck and two in his right buttock," Brian said. "No pre-mortem wounds. The nails driven through his wrists and feet were done post-mortem."

"Why would the Ripper guide our killer to make a display? Why would the killer add to it?" Jack asked, closing the folder he was reading. He handed it off to Will, who tucked it under his arm to take back to his desk with him. "Yesterday you ran off before you told us what you saw, Will."

"The Ripper wanted to punish Gideon. We know he sees himself as above men, maybe even as a God in his own way. Gideon needed to ask for forgiveness for trying to claim his identity. For our killer? Gideon's death was a sacrifice to the Ripper as much as it was a favor," Will said. He walked around the table Gideon laid on, to the body of the guard. He studied him, then looked at the board by the wall, where an enlarged photograph of his crucifixion stood pinned. "This was him trying to prove his worth on his own."

"Trying?" Jack asked.

"And failing. The Ripper won't be impressed."

"Think we should put out a report that both men were victims of the Ripper? Try to draw him out since his ego is already bruised?" Jack walked over to Will to look at the board with him.

"I don't know, Jack. It depends on who he's going after next," Will said as he pulled his glasses off his face to rub his eyes. He didn't want to consider pissing the Ripper off, not if it meant he could go after him again. "Our new killer might try to kill and display the other two workers if he's seeking his approval. Any sign of them yet? The van?"

"No. I have agents canvassing the area and reviewing camera footage."

"Good news," Beverly said as she appeared in the doorway of the lab. She had a folder open in one hand, leafing through it with her other as she walked into the room. "The saplings were European white birch. They aren't native to the area and Maryland has them on the invasive species list. Virginia doesn't, so they either came from a nursery there or from a property where they've begun to grow wild."

Jack held his hand out for the report and she glanced up at him, then handed it off. He looked through it himself. Beverly caught Will's attention and offered him a smile. He smiled back for a quick moment, then looked away, back at the board. Back at the crucifixion.

"Haloperidol and promethazine are used in combination to sedate aggressive patients," Will said. "We know who the nurse was?"

“Young guy named Matthew Brown,” Jack mumbled, still reading the information about the trees.

“He’s our killer.”

“You sure? You had tranqs in your system when we found you,” Jimmy reminded him.

Will frowned and glanced over at the room, at the three staring at him with differing expressions. Bev looked uncomfortable but sorry, Brian looked like he didn’t want this to become a subject they discussed at all, and Jimmy looked confused as to why everyone got weird all of a sudden. Jack was pointedly ignoring the four of them, turning away as he read. Will huffed and started peeling his gloves off. “Yeah, but not the specific combination that psych wards use to quickly sedate violent criminals.”

“Fair point,” Jimmy held his hands up in defeat.

“I’ll get on the phone with Chilton, have him send over all the info he has on Brown that we haven’t gotten yet. I’ll also ask him what sedation methods they keep on site,” Jack said and he tossed the report to Will, who fumbled to catch it since he was still holding the Gideon’s autopsy file. “Figure out how all this connects. And you three, figure out how to narrow the tree search down from the entire state of Virginia to a few properties or nurseries.”

With that, Jack left the room. Will looked around for the autopsy file on the guard, found it, and hurried out of the room before he could get trapped in a conversation with anyone. He wasn’t in the mood. Will went to his desk, picking his bag up off the floor and shoving the three files into it. He slung it over his shoulder, then made his way to Jack’s office. Just in case he was on the phone, Will knocked and waited. Moments later, he heard Jack yell that he could come in.

“I’m going home. To Baltimore,” he said, not fully going into the office. “The nurse. He’s the one who showed up at my house.”

“Seems like it,” Jack said, glancing up at Will. “Should we do a protection detail at Dr. Lecter’s home?"

“No,” Will said, almost too loud. They had been useless as his own house as it was, and he didn’t think Hannibal would appreciate some cops bringing attention to his home. It was too nice of a neighborhood. “But I’d like to know what he looks like.”

Jack gave him a serious look, considering the request. After a moment, he turned his attention to his computer and began typing and clicking with his mouse. Moments later, his printer came to life. He pulled the paper off of the tray and held it out. Will crossed the room and reached out to take it from him. It was an enlarged image of the nurse’s employee ID. The young man had a smirk on his face, chin tilted up, dark hair cut short to his head. The completely wrong angle for Will to judge if his jawline looked similar to the man who’d approached him in the dark, head down, face covered by the brim of a baseball cap. But he knew who to look for now, what face to scan for in the pedestrians around Hannibal’s house, his office.

“Thanks,” he said, then he turned to leave. To go home. To puzzle over the autopsies, the pictures, the case files. To look into his own display, at Abigail’s, to see if there was any hint that this was coming, or if the Ripper just saw an opportunity and took it.

“Will,” Jack called out. Will stopped and looked back at him, unsure of what else the man wanted. “Tell Hannibal that Bella and I will be delighted to attend his dinner party. I haven’t had a chance yet but I’d like to tell him our exchange is water under the bridge.”

“What exactly happened?” Will heard the words coming out of his mouth before he could stop them. He wanted to know. Hannibal was vague when he tried to ask. Beverly hadn’t told him yet.

The older man let his stern look break and he gave Will a smile, a friendly expression that he often chose not to wear at work. “He was trying to protect you, that’s all. I took it personally.”

The empath mimicked the smile briefly, then turned back around to leave. Jack let him this time, going back to his work. Will navigated his way from the BAU department through the halls to the parking lot. He wondered if he could make it back to Baltimore in time to meet Hannibal for lunch. It was disorienting, to have this much freedom throughout his days, not being dragged around to interview people or investigate leads, not playing special agent and instead just acting as a regular old profiler. It almost made him miss the day he walked back into his classroom and students inappropriately clapped for him. He wondered how they’d react to his return to teaching now, now that he wasn’t just an instructor who shot a serial killer. Now that he was a victim.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; WEDNESDAY, 20:06

For the second time, Will spent his afternoon and early evening preparing dinner. He spent a fair amount of time avoiding working the Gideon case by typing things like ‘*easy fancy meal recipe*,’ ‘*simple French recipes*,’ and ‘*Italian recipes not pasta*’ into Google. After a frustrating hour of reading recipes and several house wives’ life stories and contemplating whether he should install Pinterest on his phone or not, Will decided that if Hannibal really cared about him, any meal he made would be fine. He settled on making a pork loin roast with some steamed vegetables on the side. It took the onus off of Hannibal to always make dinner after he got home from work, at the very least. It also meant he could stay out of the study, where his files sat, where a pile of white birch sat stacked next to the fireplace.

He was ready for Hannibal this time. The food was done by the time he normally arrived home, he had located those fancy metal cloches in the pantry and plated the food, then covered the plates to keep the meals hot. After the table was set, he looked up the best type of wine to serve with pork and found a bottle that didn’t look like it was worth an entire paycheck, and he double checked the instructions on decanting wine before he poured it into a decanter that he set on the table along with two wine glasses. All that was left was for Hannibal to arrive home, and he wasn’t sure what to do with himself. Should he stand in the hall and wait? Sit in the dining room? He felt dumb for worrying about it, but he wasn’t sure if Hannibal would have the same reaction as last time, or if he wanted him to react the same,

or if Hannibal would assume he expected any kind of physical contact and that led to Will feeling like he shouldn't have made dinner at all.

The front door opened, then clicked shut. Will listened as Hannibal removed his coat and hung it up, then stepped down the hall towards the kitchen. He waited a moment before he walked out of the dining room to meet him. He acted natural, or at least some semblance of natural.

Hannibal caught sight of him, his face a blank expression for just a moment before it turned into a warm smile. "Will. You've made dinner again."

"Yeah, it's ready. I hope that's okay," Will said, motioning for Hannibal to follow him to the dining room.

"Is there an occasion?" He asked, walking to the younger man rather than going right through the doorway. He set his hand on Will's lower back and leaned in to kiss his forehead, careful. Chaste. Will relaxed into the touch.

"No," he lied. Then he amended, "Procrastination."

That earned him a soft chuckle, and Hannibal gently squeezed his hip before guiding him into the dining room. "It smells lovely. Thank you, Will."

Hannibal let go of Will's waist once they were at the table, and he pulled the chair out at the head of the table for the other. Will looked at him, momentarily confused, until Hannibal moved to the seat Will normally sat in and seated himself. After a few seconds, Will realized he was being given honor of the host since he made dinner. He smiled to himself, then picked up the decanter and carefully poured both Hannibal and himself their glasses of wine. Once done, he plucked up the cloches off of their plates and repeated what he'd seen Hannibal do many times before and placed them on the sideboard, out of the way. Only then did he seat himself.

He waited until Hannibal picked up his own silverware, cut himself a piece of meat, and ate before Will did the same. If it wasn't up to his standards, Hannibal had enough manners to keep it to himself.

After a comfortable silence while they ate their meal, Hannibal placed his utensils down and brought his wine glass to his nose to scent it, then he took a sip. He turned his attention to Will after, who raised his eyebrows in question.

"May I ask if you are worried about the meal, my reaction, or your work?" He asked, his eyes sparkling with amusement.

Will took in a deep breath and sat back in his chair, setting his own silverware down. He picked up his own wine glass as a stalling tactic. It did smell like good wine. Great wine. He took a sip. He set his glass down and chose bluntness. "All three."

"The meal is more than satisfactory. I will not kiss you without permission, just as I asked the last time. What about your work has you worried?" Hannibal smiled at Will, wide enough to

show teeth, then continued his meal as he awaited his answer.

Will let out a quiet laugh, looking away from the man, down to his own plate. “More than satisfactory?”

“Yes. It is quite good, Will,” Hannibal’s voice carried the same amusement as his eyes, his grin. Will smiled down at his food, catching on that he was being teased, that Hannibal was enjoying the food and he didn’t need to worry. It was another shade of the man that he didn’t see often. He found that liked it.

“The wood in your fireplace,” he glanced up, to see if Hannibal’s face would change, “is it European white birch?”

“Yes,” Hannibal answered, his turn for bluntness. He took another bite of his food, chewing and swallowing it fully before he cocked his head slightly and said, “I suspect you are not learned in dendrology well enough to know the difference between European and local white birch. The saplings?”

Will nodded. He went back to his dinner, eating quietly. He knew Hannibal was waiting him out, expecting an explanation, but Will also knew he already was connecting the dots. Figuring out what was worrying him, what the implication was.

Their meal was finished in silence, the light clinking of silverware on china and the soft thud of wine glasses being set down on wood were the only sounds. Will regretted not putting music on, but it hadn’t occurred to him. He often ate alone, in silence, with nothing but his dogs and his thoughts. It was another small change he realized he appreciated, When they finished their food, they both stood and went about their new nightly routine of clearing their dishes from the table, Hannibal washing while Will dried, Hannibal wiping down the counters, the stove. Will put away any leftovers there might be and washed whatever last dishes there were. Hannibal always dried last and folded the dish towels when he was finished.

Once they were done cleaning, before Will could slip away to his room, Hannibal caught him by the waist again. He gently pulled and Will allowed it, stepping close enough that he could lay his head on the man’s chest. He loosely wrapped his arms around Hannibal, and the taller man kept one arm on his hip, wrapping the other around his shoulder to hold the back of his neck. Will closed his eyes and just listened to the sound of his breathing, of his heartbeat.

“You worry that I am a target,” Hannibal spoke softly, resting his cheek on Will’s head. “That there may be jealousy, and this is a warning that I am the one to seek forgiveness or be crucified.”

“Gideon was a surgeon. You were a surgeon,” Will began, his own voice muffled against the other man’s chest. “He stole the reputation. You’re stealing me.”

Will heard Hannibal make a soft sound of amusement, then, “I’ve not successfully stolen you?”

He laughed against him, smiling despite the fear. Will rolled his head so he could look up at Hannibal, who lifted his own cheek away and relaxed his grip on the back of Will's neck to allow him more movement. Hannibal didn't look scared to Will, not even a bit concerned. It helped calm his own nerves, made him hope he was letting his judgment be clouded by emotion and in the morning, he'd be able to make more sense of everything. The most likely scenario is that the Ripper saw an opportunity to exact revenge on Gideon and took it, and the timing meant nothing else.

"Either we need to look at your property or we need to let Jack know," he said. If nothing was found, it would put his mind at ease

Hannibal placed another soft kiss to his forehead. "Uncle Jack lives closer than we do. They may search the property."

"He accepted the invite. Said whatever you two talked about was water under the bridge," Will repeated for Jack as he pulled away from Hannibal. The other held him a moment longer before he gave in, allowing Will his space. "I'll call him in the morning and tell him about your property, if you'd write down the address for me."

"Of course," Hannibal said. He reached up and brushed curls from Will's forehead, looking at him almost reverently. Overwhelmed, Will averted his gaze, but he didn't move any farther away. "My morning schedule has been cleared to allow time for your appointment. I will take you. Leave your case for tomorrow and lay in bed with me tonight."

Will nodded his assent. They left the kitchen, Hannibal making a quick detour to his study to retrieve his iPad before they went upstairs. It wasn't very late so he would lay there and read while Will looked at articles on his phone, until they decided it was time to turn the lights off and settle in. Hannibal would curl up around him, a hand on his heart, protective and safe. It was getting harder and harder to stay in the guest room, and the thought of going back to his own home hadn't even crossed his mind in a few days. It bothered Will less and less each time he realized how attached he was getting, how used to casual touching he was becoming, to domesticity. How much easier it was to accept help.

trunco

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; THURSDAY, 10:08

Will's phone kept ringing. The first time, it rang while he was sitting in the exam room at the neurologist's office, waiting for the doctor. The second time, the neurologist was in the room, scans of Will's brain from the hospital records up on the light board. The third time, he was undressing in a small cubicle and putting on a disposable, paper gown to get another MRI. He finally slid it out of his pocket as he was folding his pants, now that he was out of sight of Hannibal, to see that it was Jack. He sent a quick text stating he was at an appointment. The three dot bubble indicating that Jack was typing back popped up right as Will was about to lock his screen. He waited instead.

Jack informed him that they located Gideon's transport van along with the driver, who was found deceased, and he was sent GPS coordinates instead of an address. Will frowned at his phone and typed, *Am I really needed on scene?* The typing bubble showed back up. It disappeared. His phone rang. Will sighed and hit the accept button.

"I'm at the neurologist," he said flatly, not giving Jack the opportunity to be the first to talk. It must have caught the man off guard because he didn't immediately respond.

"Alright. When will you be done?" He was using that careful tone again, after a brief pause.

Will rubbed his eyes and sighed. Soon, he knew. He was going to get his MRI, then the neurologist was going to take a preliminary look to compare it to his previous scans to determine if they would need to make any immediate adjustments to his current treatment. The full report would come back from the radiologist in a few hours, he was told. He knew he couldn't leave early, that he had to get this done. Hannibal had pulled too many strings, put in too much effort for him.

"Not sure. I'm actively undressing to get an MRI done," Will said. "Is it staged?"

"It's not a tableau, if that's what you're asking. Looks like he tried to stage it like an accident. It was found down an embankment and the driver is still buckled into his seat," Jack told him.

"No Brown?"

"Nope."

"Okay. Give me … an hour. Two tops," Will said, glancing at the time on his phone screen. They said their goodbyes and Will shoved his phone back into his pants pocket. The pants and the rest of his clothes were shoved into a locking cubby before he padded back out to wait for a nurse to take him to the MRI room. Hannibal was sitting in a chair, legs crossed at the knee, coat folded in his lap, and he was watching Will. He didn't make eye contact, knowing the man was going to ask about what Jack wanted if he did. Instead, he just sat down next to him. He waited.

When the nurse came to gather him, Will handed his key and his glasses off to Hannibal. He followed the woman obediently, declined any music during his scan, and laid on the table when instructed. She explained the process of adding contrast and he just nodded along, laying his arm out to the side for her when she was ready. His arm went cold momentarily as the contrast entered his vein, but it subsided. She finished, then removed herself and her supplies from the room. Will realized then that the last time he was conscious for one of these scans, he was hallucinating. Vividly. The thought of it happening again made his stomach feel tight, his chest hurt. As the machine kicked on, Will chose instead to imagine he was back on his property, in the river, casting a line. His pack was on shore, digging in the sand, chewing sticks. Waiting for him and enjoying the warmth sunlight as he fished.

It seemed like only moments passed before he was sliding out of the machine. He opened his eyes, once again in a big, white, too cold for a paper gown room. The nurse told him he did great, even though all he did was lay still, then she took him back through to the changing area. Hannibal watched him as he passed by, holding the key for his cubby out to him. Will took it and he went back to change. To check his phone. No more texts or calls had come through. It had been fifty-six minutes since he last looked at the time.

He changed back into his own clothes and balled the paper gown up, tossing it in the trash where instructed, before he went back out to where Hannibal now stood. He was handed his glasses and he smiled a thank you, before they made their way back to the exam room as they had been told to do. He chose to sit in the chair next to Hannibal, foregoing getting back up on the table. Hannibal held his hand out, his palm up. Will stared down at it before he took it.

“Thank you,” Hannibal said, after a few moments.

“What?” Will glanced up at him, confused.

“You often abandon care to the detriment of your health,” he said, smiling at Will. “I appreciate your effort today. You have shown a great improvement.”

“Are you therapizing me, Dr. Lecter?” Will asked, almost sarcastically, looking up at the other through his lashes.

Hannibal hummed softly, squeezing his hand. “Therapizing and executing positive reinforcement.”

A knock on the door announced the arrival of the neurologist. He brought with him good news, informing them both that the inflammation in Will’s brain has visibly gone down. Once he finished his round of medications from the hospital and the final report came back, the neurologist would start him on a daily regimen of corticosteroids and an anti-seizure medication. It seemed reasonable to him. Explained things. Made Will feel better that a majority of his past year was not him losing his mind. They made their way to check out at the front desk, Hannibal made a follow up appointment for Will, and they were free to leave. Will dutifully followed the other back out to the Bentley, where they climbed in, but Hannibal didn’t start the engine.

“Are you off to a crime scene?” He asked instead. Will glanced at him, knowing the unasked question. He nodded and pulled his phone out to get the coordinates, plugging them into the

GPS. Hannibal turned the key over, the engine roared to life, and he pulled away from the curb.

A short thirty minute drive later and they were rolling onto the scene. There weren't as many people as usual, only one forensics van, a tow truck, and a spattering of cars and agents, mostly ones Will barely recognized or didn't know at all. They were along a highway, the left lane blocked by police cars and the beginning of a guard rail was really the only thing visible once the asphalt ended. It looked to be along the side of a steep hill. Once parked on the shoulder of the road, they got out and made their way through the police line, Will flashing his badge. Jack had already caught sight of them, walking over to greet them, holding a hand out to Hannibal.

"Jack," Hannibal greeted, shaking his hand.

"Hannibal, I'm glad you could accompany Will. Will," Jack nodded at the younger man. He started walking back towards the guard rail, leading them. The tow truck was already in position, and agents and the driver were in the act of hooking the van up to pull it up the embankment from below. "We've already removed the driver. Tracks indicate that the van was driven around the guard rail. Whoever dropped it must have gotten out and pushed it. It's still in neutral."

"How close is this to an on or off ramp?" Will asked.

"About a mile," Jack answered.

"We think he walked back or hitchhiked?"

"No idea. You think the Ripper waited around while he got rid of a van?" Jack asked, glancing between the two men.

"That seems unlikely, given his profile," Hannibal said, peering over the embankment himself to look at the van below.

"Hannibal is right. This screams of desperation, or … or inexperience," Will said, frowning to himself. "Would have been easier to abandon it in a commuter lot. Sell it to a chop shop. Wipe it clean of evidence and park it in front of the BSHCI as a taunt."

"A fledgling, desperate to fly," Hannibal mused.

"Seems like the Ripper pushed him from the nest too soon," Jack said, shoving his hands into his coat pocket.

"Cause of death for the driver?" Will asked, turning away from the van below, scanning the road. It was mostly flat. A curve going back towards the direction they drove from, but it wouldn't be a difficult walk if the killer was alone without a ride.

"He looked pretty banged up but Zeller said it wouldn't be fatal. Body's en route to the lab now. We'll know later today."

“Mind if I catch a ride?” Will asked. He glanced at Hannibal, who turned away from the van to look at Will, but there was no judgment. No warning not to go.

“Sure,” Jack agreed.

“Has Will provided you with the information regarding my property in Virginia? I keep a small orchard of European white birch trees, and he has informed me they are pertinent to the Gideon murder scene,” Hannibal said, as the three men began walking back towards where cars were parked, away from the embankment.

“No,” Jack’s voice was darker than it had been, more serious. He pulled out a notepad and pen from his coat pocket and held it out to Hannibal, who wrote down the address for him. The man turned to Will and asked, “Is there a reason you waited to tell me?”

Will huffed and shook his head, frowning at Jack, anger flaring in his chest at the insinuation. The man still was questioning his motives, even over something transparent. “Appointment. I’ll wait in the car.”

He stomped off to collect his bag from the back of the Bentley, then went to Jack’s car where he threw open the passenger door before getting in and slamming it shut. The two other men spoke briefly, neither guarded, probably about him. Or the dinner party. Hannibal glanced at Will when they were done speaking and offered him a soft smile before heading towards his own vehicle. Jack heaved a visible sigh, then joined him. Neither spoke as they pulled off to make their way down to Quantico.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; THURSDAY, 18:45

Will was not home yet. Hannibal had texted him to ask when he would return using the timing of dinner as an excuse, but he had not responded. Will was his own person, with his own work, and would pull back quickly if he was pushed too far too fast. Hannibal did not want to damage what progress he had made, so to busy himself once he got home, he chose instead to perfect the presentation of the foods that he will be serving at his dinner party, and finish writing instruction cards for the catering service. It would serve as a good distraction and Will would still have something to eat once he arrived home. Will could dine at the island while Hannibal cleaned. They could discuss the day’s events. It was something to look forward to.

He selected Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons* for his musical accompaniment and set about collecting ingredients and utensils from his pantry. His stockpile was running thin on certain ingredients, a side effect of having another in his home at all times. It was something he would need to remedy in time. If another Devon Silvestri would grace Baltimore with his presence, it would be another easy cover, but even so, he could make do for now.

On his last trip from his pantry, Hannibal heard the front door close. Will must be home. He would have to wait for food, since he hadn’t responded or called. Hannibal removed his vest and folded it neatly over the back of a chair, then donned an apron, tying it snug around his waist. He washed his hands, dried them, then caught scent of someone who was not Will.

Someone who was nervous, but he smelled sickly rather than sweet like Will when he was anxious. Hannibal turned, calmly, to his island as if he did not notice the young man standing in the kitchen doorway. He selected a knife from his butcherblock and began the process of cutting thin slices of heart.

“Did he take you? Back to the scene?” Matthew asked, aware Hannibal knew he was there. Aware the man was paying him no attention.

“Yes,” Hannibal answered, not yet looking at him. He continued his work. “Often, when the quality of meat is substandard, many will over season to compensate. What you were given was not substandard. There was no need for additions.”

The man approached the island then, but he kept a distance between the two. Hannibal set his knife down to move cuts of heart from the cutting board to a bowl. He dried his hands on a towel, then finally looked up at the other, waiting for an explanation, his expression blank. He had no need to humor this boy.

“I’m not an amateur,” Matthew said, his tone sharp. “I’ve been satiating my tastes for years. No one was aware. Now, they’re looking for me and you can’t appreciate what I’ve done.”

“Yet you chose to make amateur mistakes,” Hannibal said, picking his knife back up. He continued slicing. “You gifted them the guard, his means of death. Now the driver. These errors are yours, Mr. Brown.”

“My errors are your errors, Chesapeake Ripper,” Matthew closed the gap between himself and the island then, looking more confident, feeling as if he had some control now that he spoke a threat out loud. Hannibal watched as he pulled Will’s usual chair out and sat in it. A small wave of anger hit him, to his own surprise, but he did not show it. He simply continued his prep work.

“You intend for me to fix your mistakes or else you will reveal my secrets,” he stated, glancing up to see the young man’s smirk.

“Who better to have under my thumb than you?” Matthew asked. He reached out and plucked a piece of raw heart from the bowl, unwashed fingers touching the meat. Hannibal allowed it to happen, despite the rudeness. He watched as the man inspected the piece of meat, then plopped it into his mouth. He chewed it, smiling broadly at Hannibal as he did.

“Perhaps a misdirection,” Hannibal suggested. “Their evidence against you is based mainly on your status as the only missing person left to find.”

“So, what? I send a ransom note or something?” He asked, unserious, laughing. He reached out once again to take another piece of meat, and in a swift motion, Hannibal caught his wrist and held his hand to the cutting board, bringing the knife down to severe three of Matthew’s fingers at the second knuckle. As the young man screamed and pulled his hand away, Hannibal calmly picked up his dish towel and wiped the blood from his blade.

“Yes. Send these to Agent Jack Crawford, head of the BAU department based out of the FBI’s office in Quantico, Virginia,” he instructed. He placed his knife down on the counter,

unafraid of retribution, and held the towel out to Matthew. “Apply pressure. You are dripping blood onto my floors.”

“You fucking son of a,” Matthew groaned, but he snatched the towel away, wrapping it around his hand with his uninjured one. He held it, tight as he could, as if squeezing would end the pain. “I fucking helped you.”

“You threatened me,” Hannibal said with a light shrug. He took another dish towel from a drawer and carefully rolled the three fingers up into it, then held the bundle out to the other. Matthew took in a few deep breaths before he pressed his injured hand against his chest, holding the towel in place. He grabbed his fingers from Hannibal. He stood from the chair, from Will’s chair.

“I’m not fucking done with you,” he threatened, again, then began to back away. Hannibal watched him, more concerned now with cleaning the man’s blood from his floor, from his counter before Will arrived home.

“Remember, Agent Jack Crawford,” Hannibal reiterated. “His office is situated in Quantico, Virginia, not here nor Washington, D.C. I would suggest placing them in plastic before mailing as to avoid untimely leaks.”

Once the other had retreated across the kitchen, he turned around and fled. Hannibal calmly followed, only to make sure he was gone before Will arrived home. He stood in his doorway, which Matthew had left open, and he watched as the young man got into a car. He peeled away from the curb, squealing his tires and marking the asphalt. Hannibal frowned, but there was nothing to do about that now. The front door was closed once more and he returned to the kitchen to clean his floors, to make sure Will’s chair was not tainted with the blood of another. Vivaldi’s composition transitioned from summer to fall, and Hannibal hummed along as he cleaned.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; THURSDAY, 20:03

“You’re still here?” Beverly asked as she walked into the office, a takeout box in her hands with file folders stacked on top of it. Will glanced up at her from his computer and then looked down at the time on his monitor. He groaned and rubbed his face when he realized what time it was.

“Yeah, I guess I am. So’re you,” he pointed out. He picked his bag up off the floor and fished his phone out of it. Hannibal had texted him over two hours ago.

Bev threw herself down in her office chair, set the files on her desk, then rummaged through a drawer. She found a plastic spork and a plastic fork, then rolled herself and her food over to Will’s desk, where she set the box down and tossed him the spork. He caught it and frowned at her, then looked down at the food. It was some kind of white sauce on pasta, and he was hungry. She ate a few bites before pushing it closer to him and giving him an expectant look.

“Thanks,” he said, then took a bite for himself.

“Trouble in paradise?” She asked through a mouthful of noodles.

Will laughed lightly and shook his head, “No. Why wouldn’t the Ripper take organs from Gideon?”

“Dunno,” Beverly shrugged. “Why does he take organs in the first place? He took the muralist’s leg too.”

“Hm. Maybe we’re looking at it wrong,” Will said, trying to spear another noodle on his spork before giving up and scooping it. He chewed slowly, staring at the pictures of Gideon’s disembowelment on his computer screen. “File says Gideon claimed he knew the Ripper’s identity. Maybe this wasn’t retribution, but self-preservation.”

“Could be. He’s a careful guy,” Bev agreed. “Think Gideon knew him from his surgical days?”

“No. He wouldn’t have been so confused about his own identity,” Will said, sounding distracted. He clicked the screen away from the images over to statements given by hospital staff. “I’ve been … considering something.”

“Shoot,” she encouraged, again through a mouthful of pasta.

“I don’t think I was meant to vomit up Abigail’s ear,” he said, his voice hushed, as if he didn’t want to speak the words out loud. He didn’t turn his attention back to Beverly, not wanting to see her face, her reaction.

She stabbed her fork into the pile of pasta and leaned back in her chair, breathing out a deep breath slowly. After a moment of processing, thinking, she spoke, “Okay. Do you remember anything from when you ate it?”

Will shook his head. His spork joined her fork and he leaned his elbow on his desk, putting his head into his hand. Since his dream of eating from Chilton’s body, the image of a tube down the man’s throat, bits of memories had been clawing their way to the surface, trying to break through. He tried to push them down, but sitting at his desk these last few hours, going through all the known Ripper files and trying to figure out the differences between his, Gideon’s murders during his escape, and the new killer’s… “I didn’t eat it, Bev. It wasn’t chewed. I wouldn’t have just … *swallowed* a whole human ear. He fed me. He was feeding me. And I don’t know for how long.”

“Will,” she turned on that damn dealing-with-victims tone and he wished she hadn’t. “You were only really sick for a short period of time--”

“No, no. No,” he threw his glasses down on his desk and spoke with his hands now, to emphasize his point. “I was sick for a *long* time, Bev. I was seeing things, even before Hobbs’ case really got into my head. Hell, the first night after Jack took me to Minnesota, I saw Elise Nichols laying in bed next to me, dead but alive. I thought I was *mad* and I couldn’t… I *can’t* be hospitalized. They’d never let me out. Even now.”

He glanced at her, flicking his gaze over briefly to see, to see if she was disgusted, or upset, or offended. She just looked at him like she was sad for him, which was almost worse. Will looked away.

“You’re a good guy, Will, and you’re good at what you do,” Bev said, then changed her tone back to normal, no longer using her special victim voice. “Now, tell me your theory about what the Ripper does with the organs.”

“He’s eating them,” Will said, his tone dark. “And he was trying to make me develop a taste for it.”

With that, she picked up the pasta that neither of them was eating any longer and threw it right into the trash bin. “So much for my appetite. It makes sense though. What else is someone going to do with a bunch of livers, kidneys, and an entire leg?” She paused, glancing down at Will’s side. “Do you think..?”

“Probably,” Will admitted with a frown. “I’ve been trying not to see it.”

“Can’t blame you,” Bev said with a shrug. She sat herself back down into her chair and rolled it back over to her desk. “Wasn’t he already trying to frame you?”

“Maybe he wasn’t. Maybe he was *nesting*, and I ruined it by throwing the ear up, by turning myself in.”

“So… He challenges you. You pass his test. He becomes infatuated with you. He starts adding pieces of himself to your stuff and feeding you people so you’re used to it by the time he wins you over? Then he kills Sutcliffe as revenge for not treating your illness? Then Madchen because you two might form a connection?” Bev mulled the new theory over, arms crossed and resting on her desk. “I guess if I was some kind of psycho serial killer, that would make sense to me. So why’d he give you back instead of just keeping you?”

Will leaned back in his chair and turned his gaze up at the ceiling, at the bright fluorescent lights above as he considered his answer. Then he said, his tone bleak, “He sees me as his equal… He wants me to *choose* him.”

Bev grinned at him and faked a shiver to lighten the mood, “Creepy.”

“Can you drive me home?” He asked after rolling his eyes at her, but he did huff a quiet laugh. Will could appreciate that she wanted to be done with the conversation. He wasn’t much interested in thinking about it much longer either, at least not tonight.

“Ugh, yeah,” she said, overexaggerating to let him know she wasn’t really upset about it. “Let me check the lab. I had some samples running and they should be done by now.”

Beverly started to leave the room, but Will stopped her with a quick, “Hey.”

“Yeah?”

“What did Hannibal say to Jack? You never told me,” he was still curious.

“Oooh,” Beverly held her hands up, walking backwards towards the door. “He told Jack that he got Miriam Lass killed by abusing his authority over her and that if he abused his authority with you any more than he already has then he would, I quote, ‘ensure his early retirement.’”

“Well, shit. No wonder Jack’s been so nice,” Will said with a real laugh.

Bev shrugged at him, then disappeared out of the door with a big grin on her face. He started to go back to reading the hospital staff statements but he realized he didn’t want to anymore. He also never replied to Hannibal. He pulled his phone out and typed out, *Sorry got held up at work. Bev dropping me off. Be home late.* Will hit send, then started packing his things up to get ready to leave. After a moment, he sent a second text that read, *Don’t worry about dinner. Stole some of Bev’s.* Once his bag was packed and his computer was shut down, Will headed out of the office to find Beverly. He’d help her with any shut downs she needed to do so they could leave sooner.

quaerentem

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; FRIDAY, 09:30

He didn't sleep well. Hannibal had been up when he got home the night before, reading in the study. Will knew he was waiting for him but neither mentioned it. Their new unspoken nightly routine went fine, Will taking his medications, changing, brushing teeth, climbing into the same bed together. Hannibal had buried his face into his curls, resting his lips against the back of his neck and asked him softly if everything was alright; he'd said he wanted to discuss it later and laid there half asleep, half awake for a majority of the night. He didn't want to dream.

Getting ready to leave in the morning was a blur. Will knew he had to talk to Jack, to tell him his new theory. He was preoccupied with trying to figure out what the new killer wanted, what the saplings meant. He was worried about Hannibal. Another part of him was worried about himself, if the new killer would try to get to him too, to emulate the Ripper's own fascination. Right before he left, he circled back to find Hannibal, to ask him to keep his doors locked and he'd just knock on the door when he got back home. When Hannibal calmly agreed with no questions asked, Will thanked him and left. Got into his car. Drove to work.

The first thing he did when he arrived was walk to Jack's office and knock on the door. Permission to go inside was given and Will pulled the door open, slowly moving into the room. Jack looked up from a notepad, a stern look on his face, and he motioned to the chairs opposite his desk. Will tossed his bag into one of the chairs then seated himself.

"I'm glad you're here," Jack said, going back to whatever it was he had been writing. "I had some agents check on Dr. Lecter's property."

"And?" Will asked, after Jack paused to finish writing. He watched as the other set his pen down, pulled a file out of one of his desk drawers, flip it open, turn it around and set it on the desk. Will leaned forward to look. It was a series of photographs. The first, a picture of some trees from the distance, that looked like mature white birch. Evenly spaced. The second was a photograph of cut stumps of the mature trees, with noticeable weathering and rot; they'd been cut several weeks, if not months ago. The next picture was of young growth, then a closer picture showing where several were missing, their cuts fresh. The last few photographs were of partial tire tracks, a partial shoe mark. They were newly made enough that weather hadn't faded their details. Will flicked his gaze up to Jack.

"I'm going to have to ask Dr. Lecter to come in, just to answer some basic questions," Jack said, his tone impersonal. Professional. Will already knew the moment he saw the cut saplings that Hannibal would need to be interviewed. He also knew it meant the Ripper was going to target him. "Do I need to question you?"

“No,” Will shook his head. He slid down in his chair slightly and took a deep breath. “Jack. He’s eating them.”

“Who, Will?” Jack raised his eyebrows, questioning the sudden subject change.

“The Chesapeake Ripper. He’s eating what he harvests,” Will said, rubbing his face.

Jack leaned back in his chair, leveling a serious stare at the other. “So what? He notified Hobbs because there’s some cannibalism ring we’re unaware of? Then, because you happened to be the agent that took Hobbs down, he framed you to seek revenge? To get you out of the picture so you wouldn’t figure out he’s cannibalizing victims?”

“I wasn’t being framed, Jack,” Will said with exasperation, edging on defensive. “You were wrong. I was wrong, because I was sick and I was confused. He was inserting himself into my life while getting to know me. He was going to my house, Jack. Putting his touches on my flies. Feeding me so I’d develop a taste. Punishing Sutcliffe for not helping me. He, he damn near screamed at everyone that you were all failing me when he put that goddamn crown of flowers on my head.”

There was a pause in their conversation, Jack considering everything Will was saying. He closed the folder with the pictures from Hannibal’s property and put it away. He heaved a deep sigh and gave the younger man a sorry look. Will appreciated that he at least knew when to accept his point, because he would keep pushing back if Jack questioned it.

“Will. If that’s true, you already know he’s planning to do something to Hannibal,” he eventually said.

“I know. I know. I’ve known,” Will said, unable to keep the agitation out of his voice. “I’ve known since I went home the other night and saw his firewood by the hearth.”

“I’ll call him to come in now then,” Jack offered. Will just nodded, blinking rapidly to try and clear his eyes. He was tired. He was angry. He was scared, which was the worst part about it. He did not want to admit that to himself, to Jack. To anyone. But it was the truth. The other man picked up his work phone and dialed Hannibal’s number. Will could hear the line ring. Ring again. A third time. Then, a tinny greeting on the other line. “Dr. Lecter, hello… Yes. Actually, this is just a formality, but I have to ask you to come down and speak with us, on the record. There was evidence of activity--yes. Now, if your schedule allows… Thank you, Dr. Lecter.”

“His schedule’s been … off. Because of me,” Will admitted once Jack placed the receiver back in its cradle, his shoulders visibly relaxing now that he knew Hannibal would be coming. “It might be the only thing that’s kept him safe.”

“He’ll be here around noon. In the meantime, go get some damn coffee. You look like shit,” Jack said, offering him a smile. Will grabbed his bag and stood, rounding the chair to head to the door. “And talk to Brian and Jimmy. They completed the autopsy on the driver.”

“I’m gonna guess he has haloperidol and promethazine in his system,” Will muttered.

“Bingo,” Jack said, then turned his attention away. Back to work. Will exited the office, headed down the hall, off to find coffee before he went to the lab.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; FRIDAY, 12:15

Hannibal had been anticipating a call from Jack Crawford, and he was glad it came early. It gave him an excuse to bring Will lunch and to steal him away earlier in the afternoon than he would have left had he stayed at work until he needed to leave for his nephrology appointment. He parked his Bentley and gathered up the insulated lunch box that he brought with him, exiting the car to walk into the building. When he signed in to get his guest badge, he informed them that Jack Crawford was aware of his arrival and that contacting him was not necessary, and he made his way down to find Will. He would meet with Jack after delivering the food he had brought.

On his way through the halls, a familiar voice called out for him. Hannibal stopped in his tracks and turned to see Alana Bloom walking quickly to catch up to him. She was dressed nicely, but down in comparison to her normal attire; she must be here covering one of Will’s classes, dressing as an instructor. He smiled at her, a friendly greeting, as she was unaware of his plans and he could give her the graces. She was watching Will’s dogs still, after all.

“Alana,” he said, once she was close. She reached out to give him a half-hug and he allowed it, but did not reciprocate. He began to walk again, allowing her to fall into step with him.

“Here to see Will?” She asked, in an overly friendly tone. Hannibal glanced at her, to get a read on what lecture she was preparing to go into, but he kept a friendly, open look on his face.

“Although I do plan to stop by and deliver him a lunch that will be more nutritious than whatever he may or may not find to eat, I am here for Jack,” he informed her. She gave him a slightly surprised look, so he elaborated. “It seems one of my properties fell victim to trespass by a suspect in one of their investigations.”

“Oh,” Alana’s expression turned from surprise to concern, but his own calm demeanor must have assured her not to worry. She didn’t ask for him to explain, instead she slowed her pace. He matched her until she stopped, and he turned to face her fully aware that she intended to air her own concerns. When she spoke, she used a hushed voice, even though the hall was not occupied by anyone else but them. “Hannibal, this is not my place at all, and I know you would never have bad intentions, but … Will is in a fragile place right now.” She paused, shifting on her feet and tucking her hair behind her ear, a nervous tick. He allowed her the time to finish, waiting patiently. “What I mean to say is, be careful with him.”

With his free hand, Hannibal reached up to gently touch her upper arm. A reassuring gesture as he offered her a smile. “You are a good friend to Will, Alana, but I promise you my intentions are pure. I will have Will as long as he will have me.”

She visibly relaxed, studying the expression on Hannibal’s face, looking for honesty or simply to ease her own concerns. Alana started walking again then, in the direction he had

been walking when she caught up with him. He followed.

“It’s just that you are, in the eyes of many, a confirmed bachelor,” she said, with her more usual attitude she carried with him, but still guarded. Alana would only believe him in time.

“I suppose it should not come as a surprise that I am the subject of gossip,” he teased, earning him a light laugh from Alana. They passed through a doorway, Hannibal holding the door for her as they did. Will’s office was close and he hoped that he would be there rather than in the lab with others.

“Socialites trade in gossip and secrets,” Alana teased back. “Don’t let it go to your head.”

“Sound advice as always, Dr. Bloom,” he offered her a smile then. Hannibal paused, considering if he should question why she was headed in same direction as he was. A less direct approach seemed appropriate. “Have you eaten lunch?”

“Oh, don’t let me interrupt you and Will,” she said, to his delight. “I’m here to see Jack as well. I’m finished with lectures for the day and he’s been trying to catch me for a while.”

“It seems then that the fates have decided to buy me time,” Hannibal hummed as he nodded a farewell to her, turning to head into Will’s office. He could feel her looking at him for a moment longer, but he paid her no mind. He peered into the door, catching sight of brown curls and broad shoulders, blue eyes rapidly scanning whatever Will was reading on his computer screen. No one else was in the room. Hannibal stepped inside, closing the door slowly and softly so as not to make noise. He watched as Will leaned closer to his monitor, resting his elbow on the desk and his jaw in his hand, eyebrows furrowed together in concentration.

Hannibal cleared his throat softly. He watched as Will almost jumped, turning an angry look towards him that melted away to a surprised, yet happy smile. A real smile, not the one he gave other people. Hannibal gave one of his own.

“Hey, sorry, I didn’t hear you come in. I’m just … obsessing,” Will muttered, then leaned back in his chair. Then he started to stand, acting unsure of what to do. Hannibal strode across the room to close the gap, motioning for Will to sit back down. He placed the insulated lunchbox on the desk and watched as Will’s gaze fell to it. “You brought me lunch.”

“I chose to capitalize on my time,” Hannibal said, unzipping the top of the lunchbox, where he stored a small container of sour cream with a cooler pack. He set the container on the desk. He removed a thermos from the side pocket, then unzipped the bottom half, which contained still hot food, a serving for each in their own containers. “*Cepelinai*. A traditional yet simple Lithuanian dish. I thought I would combine both of our predilections; mine, a food from my homeland, and yours, a palate that prefers a rustic, heartier meal. It is, in simple terms, a dumpling.”

Hannibal removed the lids from the dishes, then plucked a spoon from the lunchbox to take sour cream and spread it atop each *cepelinai.* From the thermos, he removed the cups from the lid and set them, pouring each of them an herbal tea that he brought along. He then handed Will a fork and knife. He pulled a chair over from another desk to seat himself across

from the other, then sat patiently waiting for Will to eat. Will forewent the knife, choosing instead to cut into the dumpling with the side of his fork. He inspected the chopped meat within before spearing the piece with the tongs and bringing it to his mouth to taste. Will made a satisfied noise and Hannibal smiled. He picked up his own utensils to begin eating as well.

“You approve?” Hannibal asked after Will took a few more bites, yet to speak.

“Yes, yeah. It’s delicious, thank you,” he said, a hand covering his mouth as he spoke with it full. Hannibal’s smile grew.

“May I ask what held your rapt attention?” He inquired.

Will ate a few more bites, keeping his eyes turned away from both Hannibal and the monitor he had been so focused on when the other arrived. He allowed Will to buy time, to eat, but he would wait him out. Eventually, the younger man always gave in, always answered him.

“Gideon,” Will said finally. Hannibal merely tilted his head slightly, curious. “The Ripper was there. Or helped our new killer set up the scene. Gave him instructions, at least. It was … it was mostly *his* design. Despite that, he didn’t harvest any organs. There has to be a reason, but Gideon’s autopsy doesn’t show anything wrong with the meat.”

Hannibal caught the implication of the last word. Will knew. He sat back slightly, feigning the slightest bit of shock. “He is eating them?”

The profiler nodded, still concentrating on looking down at his dish, cutting into his second dumpling and taking another bite. After chewing and swallowing, he continued. “Yes, but there has to be a reason he chose not to eat Gideon. He didn’t respect him, so one would think he’d consume him. Unless he was seen as less than a pig. But I don’t get that from the tableau.”

“Perhaps he believed Gideon’s murder would be seen as merely a copy of his work, one he himself was not involved in,” Hannibal suggested to Will. It was closer to the truth than a lie, but he would offer no more assistance. Will glanced up at him, beautiful blue eyes beneath dark lashes, a brief moment of eye contact. Hannibal basked in it.

“He knew I’d see him,” Will deadpanned. He took his eye contact away, back to his meal to finish it. Once done, he drank his tea, then muttered another thank you. Hannibal’s own food was polished off, then he began packing the containers back into the lunchbox to take home.

“He is no fool,” Hannibal said.

“No. He’s not,” Will sighed. He leaned back in his chair and rubbed his face, his anxious habit. “Hannibal, I’m… Jack. He’ll probably tell you. But the Chesapeake Ripper is dangerous, and we think he might go after you.”

“A logical conclusion,” Hannibal agreed. “If he were to believe I failed you as Dr. Sutcliffe had, yet you continue to trust in me, then I am none other than a dead man walking.”

Will gave him an incredulous look, a bitter laugh escaping him. “How are you so calm about this?”

“He has provided us with ample warning,” Hannibal said simply. He glanced at his watch, then stood from his chair to return it to the desk from which he borrowed it. When he walked back over to Will’s, he went to pick up the lunchbox then paused his action. Will glanced up at him, still not looking happy with his peaceful composure. Hannibal reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small, flat box that had a small ribbon tied across it to keep it closed and held it out for the other. “For you.”

The empath studied him for a moment, his look turning sour, then he reached up and plucked the box from his hand. He opened it, then laughed a real, full bellied laugh. “Who the hell puts a key in a gift box?”

Hannibal smiled at Will, amused with himself and glad the reaction was the one he hoped for. He picked up the lunchbox. “You are welcome to come and go as you have been, free and without the need to knock and stand at the door as a guest would.”

“Thanks, again,” Will said, the contented look from the key gift still on his face. Hannibal took the opportunity to place his free hand on the back of Will’s neck and lean down, placing a tender kiss on the top of his head, stealing for himself the scent of the other’s happiness, as rare and hidden behind anxiety as it was. Will leaned into him, just enough to let Hannibal know it was okay, that he accepted or even wanted the touch.

“I will come collect you for your appointment once I have spoken with Uncle Jack,” Hannibal murmured against the other before he broke their contact, stepping back. Will flicked a thankful look up at him, then went back to his work. Hannibal turned then, making his way back across the room to leave, to go to his questioning. A few turns down grey hallways and he arrived. A polite knock on the door to announce his arrival. He waited patiently until he heard Jack grant him entry, then he strolled through.

When Jack caught sight of who was walking into his office, a smile lit up his face and he stood. He held a hand out and Hannibal took it, shaking it. If nothing else, the man was ever persistent with tradition, which Hannibal could respect.

“Dr. Lecter. I’m glad you could make it,” he said, tucking a hand to his chest to hold his tie as he sat himself back down. He gestured for Hannibal to sit as well, and he accepted, unbuttoning his jacket and seating himself, crossing one leg over the other, hands folded in his lap.

“Anything for a friend, Jack,” Hannibal assured with a pleasant, calm demeanor.

“Of course,” Jack agreed as he pulled out the folder that contained photographs of the other’s property. He opened it and slid it across the table to Hannibal. “I trust you understand this is just a formality. Checking you off a list, so we can move on to the actual culprits.”

Hannibal nodded, reaching forward to pluck the folder up off the desk. He reviewed the photographs, studying the details of each one as if he himself were Will, attempting to see what an agent of his talents would see. Old cuts that would match the stores of wood he kept

for his fireplace, in perfect rows, then new cuts of saplings that were erratic, careless of what damage was done or where they were taken. A tire off the road he kept maintained. Two different times when the property was visited. Two different people, one of whom held no respect for the land. Hannibal closed the folder and set it back on the desk, returning his attention to Jack.

“Officially, I have not shown you those yet,” Jack said, his voice stern. Hannibal smiled, his agreement to keep the secret. “Can you tell me the last time you were at your Virginia property?”

“Early spring, when I am least likely to disturb wildlife and the trees themselves are still dormant,” Hannibal answered. “It is a routine that I have kept for many years, verifiable by several acquaintances.”

“I trust you could easily explain your whereabouts over the course of the last week?”

“I keep a detailed planner, and Will has been with me each night,” Hannibal answered with full honesty.

“Good,” Jack said. He pulled the folder back to himself then set it back into its place in his desk drawer. His demeanor changed, more serious now. He leaned forward, resting both elbows on the edge of the desk, his fingers joined together as he leveled a steely look at Hannibal. “While we’re on the subject of Will, I just have to ask you something that I’ve already discussed with Dr. Chilton and Dr. Bloom. I was … hesitant to come to you, seeing as you’ve formed quite the bond with Will, but I just need reassurance.”

Hannibal shifted in his chair, not uncomfortable but wanting Jack to believe so. Whatever the other was about to ask about screamed of his primary reason to meet with him, the activity on his property being a ruse. He was curious to know what it was. “Will is a popular topic of discussion.”

Jack agreed with a nod of his head, then squared his shoulders as he asked, “Has Will shown any indication that he’s been helping the Chesapeake Ripper?”

“It is said that the first duty of man is the seeking after and the investigation of truth,” Hannibal mused after a very long, drawn out pause. He had considered his reaction; to continue his anger towards Jack’s actions regarding Will, or to challenge the man’s own thought process that brought him to this conclusion. From his perspective, Hannibal could see how he would question Will’s loyalties. Jack was being thorough, as he is an investigator at heart, but it would do well for him to have a look inside Jack’s logic and pierce through it. “May I ask why you believe Will capable of subterfuge?”

The man before him heaved a heavy sigh, dropping his hands to his desk and tapping it a few times, thinking. Considering his own answer. “The thing is, I don’t. Will’s smart. Too smart for his own mind, sometimes. But,” he paused, his expression shifting from stern to almost forlorn, “I believe that it would make more sense for Will to be involved than for the Ripper to risk his own self to backtrack just because he has an infatuation with the guy.”

“Jack. If I may speak out of turn,” Hannibal started, waiting for Jack to nod his approval to continue. “It seems you are projecting insecurities over your loss of another agent in your hunt for the Ripper. You cannot process why one agent would be returned, while another kept and killed. For this particular situation, I would recommend therapy over ostracizing an agent who has shown you nothing but loyalty, even to his own detriment.”

Frowning, Jack leaned back in his chair and held his hands up in surrender, then blew out a breath he must have been holding. “You make a good point,” he conceded. “On a lighter note, if Will has not told you, Bella and I appreciate and accept your invitation.”

“I look forward to seeing you both in my home again,” Hannibal said. “Goodbye, Jack.”

“Goodbye, Dr. Lecter.”

Hannibal uncrossed his legs and stood, buttoning his jacket with practiced fingers before giving the other a slight bow of his head. He intended to leave, to collect Will. They had a schedule to keep most importantly, but he also enjoyed their time together. Will’s new trust and his acceptance of care. The sudden onset of protectiveness towards Hannibal was a wonderful development as well, one that he would both appreciate and foster. An unwavering, loyal Will to stand beside him would be a thing of beauty.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for not uploading for several days! Both my birthday weekend and Hannibal being an uncooperative character to write in this chapter are at fault.
Prima Facie has also hit 100k words with this chapter, and I want to thank everyone for their views, kudos, subs, bookmarks, and lovely comments so far. They keep me motivated! ♥ Aaand I apparently *really* meant slow burn when I put it in the tags, but I promise you we're getting there.

digitos

BALTIMORE, VIRIGNIA; FRIDAY, 19:00

Will's appointment had gone well, as far as he was concerned. It basically consisted of the doctor introducing himself, chatting with Hannibal about their shared history from their days at Johns Hopkins, palpations of his lower back--which hurt, but he denied there was much pain--and questioning his diet, water intake, and exercise regimen. He was given a script for follow up blood work to make sure his remaining kidney was working as it should be, and Hannibal had very not discretely asked the doctor to include STD testing and requested a script of his own. Will hadn't argued. He didn't bring it up when they went to the lab. He didn't mention it when they arrived home. When Hannibal had expectantly stared at him after offering him a snack to 'recover from his blood draw,' he ate it in silence.

For whatever it was worth, Hannibal noticed his irritation and when the evening came around, he had ushered him to the door and helped him into his coat. They left the house, took the Bentley, and ended up at Hannibal's office right in time for his Friday appointment. Will's annoyance grew, while he simultaneously felt relief. He followed Hannibal inside, removing his own coat and hanging it up himself, and he immediately sat himself down in his usual chair. He tracked Hannibal's calm, unhurried movements as he himself removed his coat and walked around his office, stopping first to retrieve a familiar notebook and a pen before he seated himself in his chair. Will all but glared as the other man settled himself in properly, took his time crossing his leg, and opening the notebook before looking up at him with that damn measured psychiatrist look.

He did not speak. Will knew he was waiting him out, but he wasn't interested in playing the game tonight.

"Do you have *expectations*, Dr. Lecter?" He asked, his voice flat. It earned him the faintest twitch of Hannibal's lips into the smallest of smiles, before the clinical expression returned.

"Have my intentions not been made clear, Will?" Hannibal answered with a question of his own. Will chuckled softly, if only to highlight his annoyance, then looked away, not even caring what else he could focus on. It wasn't that he didn't know or hadn't thought of moving forward with whatever their relationship currently was. Before he could consider why he was so irritated, Hannibal spoke again. "Is your concern that I've chosen a stressful time, a time where you are uncertain that there may even be a future with me?"

There it was. Will sucked in a deep breath and nodded in one harsh movement. "You're acting like things are fine. Hunky-dory, even."

"As of this moment, they are. Should I deny myself my life in fear of a hypothetical future? Must you deny yourself?" Hannibal's voice stayed steady. Anchored. Will closed his eyes, wanting to ruminate in his anger, not wanting to tempt himself to see the calmness, to mirror the other. When he didn't respond, Hannibal pushed further. "The outrage you are experiencing can be a tool, one which can be wielded to shape the future."

“Like you wield your composure,” Will said quietly, more to himself than to Hannibal. The other hummed a sound of agreement. He stood then, opening his eyes and moving across the room, putting more distance between them than the chairs allowed. He settled himself against Hannibal’s desk, crossing his arms over his chest, looking over at the other. He picked his pocket square to stare at, the bright white easy to focus on against the gray and red of his suit. “He’s targeting you. I’m being selfish by staying at your house.”

“Selfishness resembles self-respect. You are choosing yourself, at my encouragement,” Hannibal pointed out. “Have you considered an alternative to my possible murder?”

“What else could it be?” Will huffed out.

“It seems he has forgone his usual artistry for a base design, and a misdirection could be in play,” he suggested. Hannibal stood from his chair. He walked towards Will, coming to a stop directly in front of him. He leaned to the side to set the notebook down on the desk, then straightened up. Will could feel him staring down at him. “Look at me, Will.”

Will flicked his gaze up, catching sight of the affection swimming in the other’s amber eyes. Hannibal’s hand came up to gently hold his jaw, to rub his thumb along his cheek. He realized only after he’d done it that he had leaned into the touch. “It feels wrong to choose myself over you.”

“Choose yourself because of me,” Hannibal insisted with a firm tone, but Will caught the tenderness just under the surface. His own arms betrayed him, falling from their crossed position so that he could slide them beneath Hannibal’s suit jacket, around his waist as he sunk forward to lean against the other man’s solid frame. Hannibal welcomed him, one hand firmly at the back of Will’s neck as they embraced. Will laid his head down so that he could hear his heartbeat, feel his chest rise and fall with each breath. When Hannibal spoke again, Will pressed closer, the rumble of his voice within his chest a comfort. “I do not intend for you to separate yourself from me in a misguided attempt at my protection, Will. You will know when the time is right to use your rage. Do not allow yourself to turn your weapon onto your own self.”

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; SATURDAY, 10:17

The crunch of gravel caused a small flock of starlings to flee from Will’s front yard as he pulled into his driveway. The house looked the same since the last time he was there, save for more fallen leaves. Will pulled to a stop and put the car in park, then reached into his glovebox to get his gun. He got out of the car and rounded to the back, opening the hatch to let a flood of dogs out. He had decided late last night to give Alana another break from dog sitting, mostly to give him his own space to think. To give him a day to be away from Hannibal because he was becoming too attached.

Buster leading the pack, the dogs began barking at what appeared to be nothing as they ran for the house. They took no time to sniff, to mark territory, instead making their way up onto the porch where they gathered in a circling ring around something on the ground, pushing each other out of the way to paw at and sniff whatever it was. Will whistled for them to sit as

he flipped the safety on his gun off, holding it steady with both hands, ready but aimed at the ground. He listened, he looked. It didn't seem like anyone was around. The doors and windows were all closed up tight still from what he could see.

Will stepped towards the house, cautious, willing himself not to begin shaking. He whistled for the dogs to come to him, and one by one they did, stealing sniffs of whatever had interested them so intensely. Once they were all off the porch, he noticed a small cardboard box sitting by his door. Will let out a harsh breath of exasperation, feeling dumb that he had such an intense reaction over the dogs sniffing a box. He signaled for them to go off into the yard, to do their business or play, and he clicked the safety back on his firearm and shoved it into the back of his belt. Winston stayed by his side as he went up the steps to look closer.

The first thing he noticed was that there was no postage label on the box. With a frown, Will stepped around it and opened his screen door. He checked the front door. It was locked. Good. He turned back then to the box and pulled his cell phone out of his pocket. He shooed Winston away, who was still extremely interested in whatever it was, then took a photograph of it just in case it was a gift from the Ripper.

"Guess we've got to see what it is, buddy," he said to the dog as he pocketed his phone again. He pulled his gloves out of his coat pocket and put them on, then he bent down to pick the package up. Will looked it over, tilting it to see if there was any indications on the outside of the box of what it might be or who left it, checking to see if maybe there was a shipping label on the bottom. No label, but there was a folded up piece of paper taped to it. Will frowned and peeled it off. He set the box on the railing of his porch and unfolded the paper. In sloppy, shaky handwriting, there was a phone number with a Baltimore area code. He flipped the paper over a few times; it had nothing else written on it and it was a non-descript piece of printer paper with no letterhead or anything that could give away who sent it. "Think I should open it?"

Winston's tail beat gently against the wood of his porch as Will talked to him, but he didn't answer. Will sighed and pulled his phone back out. He wasn't going to open it, at least not here, and not without Jack, or Bev, or Jimmy. Maybe even Brian would do. He dialed Jack's number, fully aware he was most likely disturbing his peaceful weekend plans he may have with his ailing wife. It rang barely half a ring before he heard Jack's gruff voice on the other end.

"Figure something out?" Jack asked rather than greeting him.

"No, but someone left me a present. Not sure how long it's been here. Haven't been back to Wolf Trap in a week," Will said. He put his phone on speaker and pulled the text window up with Jack, so he could send him the picture of the package sitting on his porch.

"What'd they leave? And who?" His voice sounded harsher now. Will understood. Today was supposed to be an easy day, at least for him. As easy as he could hope for.

"Not opening it. My dogs are too interested in it," he admitted. "Anyone at the lab today?"

He could hear the notification hit Jack's phone when the picture went through. The other man was quiet for a moment, probably looking at it. "Not anyone I want on this. Take it straight

there. I'll call everyone, tell them to meet you there."

The line went dead before Will could say anything else. He stared at the box for a minute before putting his phone away and fishing his keys out of his pocket. He went inside his house, heading straight to his kitchen to get a plastic bag out of his bag holder under the sink. Will did a quick round to visually check that all of his windows and doors were still locked, then went back out the front door and locked it behind himself. He put the box into the plastic bag, then whistled for the dogs. He'd try again tomorrow to give Alana the day off from dog sitting, he supposed.

He loaded the pack up in the back of the car then got into the driver's seat. The package was set in the passenger seat, his gun was returned to the glovebox, and he backed out of the driveway with one more glance at his property. It clearly wasn't as secure as Hannibal's home was. This was too rural. There were no witnesses, no traffic cams, no security cameras on neighbors' houses that could track the movement of suspicious vehicles. He wasn't sure if he'd ever feel safe here again. The realization was a bitter reminder of how upended his life had become.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; SATURDAY, 12:28

Will walked into the lab, plastic bag in hand. He lifted it onto an examination table, then shrugged off his coat and made his way to the office space where the desks were. Beverly and Brian were already there at their own desks, Brian hunched over typing something while Bev had her chair leaned back as far as she could, her phone on her chest as she furiously typed away on it. Will looked down at the floor as he made his way to his own desk to drape his coat over his chair.

"Hey," Bev said first, glancing up from her phone. She went back to typing. "I've got an angry gal sending me walls of texts so this better be good."

"If it's from my admirer, it will be," Will said darkly. "He left a box with a phone number taped to it."

"Phone numbers're easy to track," Brian muttered, glancing at his watch. "Should get us out of here long before five, I hope."

"Hot date tonight?" Jimmy's voice rang out from the doorway, a big smile on his face. He came into the room and tossed his own coat and scarf down, then looked around at the other three expectantly. "Well? Fingerprints aren't going to identify themselves."

With his prompting, they all moved to the lab as a group. Coats were donned, gloves pulled on, and trays of sterile tools were set up, along with a few evidence bags and a marker. The box and paper were removed from the plastic bag. Beverly took the note to take images of it while Jimmy began locating and pulling prints from the surface of the box, focusing on where the tape was in hopes of clearer prints than what might come off of the rough surface of the cardboard. Will waited almost impatiently, arms crossed. Brian stood near him awkwardly, hands shoved into his lab coat pockets as they watched Jimmy work.

“My dogs would have torn into it if I didn’t stop them,” Will said after a long moment and to no one in particular.

“Think it’s an organ?” Brian asked, glancing at him. Will just nodded. He didn’t want to think about what could be in the box--his own kidney, an organ from another victim, more pieces of Miriam Lass that would somehow thread together Gideon’s tableau with another murder that would point them in a new direction--but he knew it was some kind of meat. He’d already come to terms with the fact that his dogs most likely knew the taste of human and judging by the way they circled and excitedly sniffed the box…

“I’m going to run the prints. Open it without me in here,” Jimmy said, making a disgusted face, as if he hadn’t seen the same gruesome murder scenes the rest of the room had. “Today is not a good day to see disembodied pieces of humans.”

“Why’s today any different?” Brian asked.

“It’s Saturday,” Jimmy said simply, taking his samples and leaving the examination area to begin scanning and running the fingerprints he was able to lift. Beverly returned shortly with the note, and she slid it into an evidence bag, sealed it, and labeled it. She set it on the table near the box.

“Who’s doing the honors?” She asked, looking up across the room and directly at Will. He shook his head. He wasn’t interested in opening it. Whatever it was would be evidence and they were the lab techs, not him. Brian grimaced at him then crossed the room to the table. He picked up a scalpel from the tray and carefully sliced the tape along the seams of the cardboard. Once done, he set the blade down and folded the flaps of the box back. Will approached so he could see inside the box. It appeared to be a white, medium sized towel that had been rolled up. Brian pulled it out, setting it on the table next to the box. The three of them peered inside, but nothing else was there.

Carefully, Brian rolled the towel over until he found the edge. He began to unroll it carefully, sliding the fabric out along the table as he did. It went from crisp white to caked in dried, flaking blood as he unrolled, careful to pull the sticking towel from itself without damaging what might be inside. When it was almost completely open, he paused. He could feel something other than towel, so he slowed down and finished the process of unrolling it to reveal three fingers.

“Well shit. Won’t be getting out by five, will we?” He asked. With tongs, the fingers were moved off of the towel and onto a tray. Beverly collected the towel with a practiced, delicate touch, taking it to her own station to begin taking samples of the dried blood from it and looking for other fibers or materials that might give them a clue as to where the fingers came from. Brian went off in his own direction, tray of fingers in hand, to begin the process of examining them so that they too could be run for fingerprints.

Will followed Brian at a distance. He listened as the other made notes, stating they were each severed at the proximal interphalangeal joint, the cut was clean and appeared to have been done pre-mortem. They appeared male, which ruled out more pieces of Miriam Lass. There was minimal decay, meaning they were severed within the last few days or kept cold. Will stepped around Brian so he could look at the incisions, “Surgical precision?”

“No but close enough,” Brian muttered. “Guillotine style amputation. It’s an antiquated term but it applies. Chopped right off with no plans to close the wounds with existing skin.”

The type of amputation meant no care for the victim. Will backed off, moving across the room to sit and wait for more information. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and pulled up his text window with Hannibal, staring at it blankly as he wondered if he should or shouldn’t tell him what was going on. As far as he knew, Will was at his house, letting the dogs roam while he either fished or worked on unfinished projects. That meant Hannibal could potentially show up at his house unannounced to surprise him with lunch. Will sighed and instead of texting, he called. With a glance at Brian, he stood up and moved farther away across the room as the phone rang.

“Will,” he heard Hannibal about purr through the phone. Will smiled down at the floor.

“Hey. Just wanted to update you,” he started, clearing his throat. Remembering why he called. “There was a package on my porch this morning and I brought it to Quantico.”

There was a silence across the line, before Will heard a discontented hum. “You would not inform me had it been an innocent gift.”

“No,” Will admitted. “Three severed fingers.”

“A threat?” Hannibal asked after another pause. Will rubbed his jaw and shrugged despite Hannibal not being able to see him.

“A phone number was taped to the box. Not sure yet if it’s a threat or … or a present, or maybe a ransom,” Will said. As he spoke, Jimmy came back into the room.

“I decided to run the prints against the missing attending first, which turned out to be a very good decision,” he said, walking across the room to hold a printout to Will. Will propped his phone between his shoulder and ear and took it from him, scanning over it. “What was in the box?”

“The third, fourth, and fifth digits of an adult male’s right hand, severed at the proximal inter--”

“Three of some guy’s fingers,” Beverly cut Brian off, looking up at the two and smirking. She was pleased with herself for taking Jimmy’s usual job of translating from him.

“Prints from the outside of the box match our missing suspect, Matthew Brown,” Will said as he read, to inform Hannibal.

“Can I print them yet?” Jimmy asked, moving over to look at the fingers.

“Will,” Hannibal’s voice through the phone. “I hear that you are busy. Send my regards to your colleagues. Please let me know when you are on your way home so that I may have dinner ready.”

“Okay, yeah. Yeah. I’ll see you tonight,” Will said. He hung the phone up and pocketed it. Jimmy had left the room already and Brian was making notes. Beverly was meticulously

placing flecks of blood into dishes while still sweeping the towel. Will walked over to her station, leaning over to look at the bloodied towel. It looked like a dish towel. A familiar one. He shifted around, turning his head so he could read the tag. It read *Sferra.* It sounded pretentious, which made Will's stomach knot. He walked out of the lab, down the hall. It was deserted, thankfully. He sat in a chair that lined the hall near the offices and pulled his phone back out. He went to the text window. *What brand dish towels do you use?* he sent to Hannibal and waited.

Will wasn't sure how long he sat in the chair, staring at his phone, anxious for it to buzz. He felt hot, his stomach ached, his hands were shaking even when he willed them to stop. To try and ease his worries, he closed his eyes and thought of the river, ripples shining in the daylight. Warmth. Wet dogs bounding along the shore. No stag man, no betrayal.

A throat cleared near him and he jumped. Will looked up to see Beverly standing with her arms crossed, leaning against a wall. A safe distance away, that sorry-you-were-a-victim look on her face. He took his glasses off and rubbed his eyes, then pushed them back on his face and he stood up from the chair.

"Jimmy matched the prints from the fingers," Beverly said softly. "They match Matthew Brown too. Guy must have been forced to tape his own fingers up in the box."

"Anyone tell Jack yet?" Will asked, glancing at his phone again. Hannibal hadn't responded yet.

"Not yet. Figured you might want to know. Do you want the lab for a minute?" She asked.

Will shook his head. "No … not much I can do with some fingers in a towel, Bev."

He ran his hand through his hair, subconsciously squeezing the back of his own neck, and he looked at his phone again. No response. It didn't mean anything. Hannibal wasn't glued to his phone. He could be drawing, or cooking, or exercising. Reading. Cleaning the house.

"I'll call Crawford. You go home," Bev said, trying to cover her concern up with waggling eyebrows. "Gotta keep the sugar daddy happy, right?"

Will felt himself almost crack, the dam break, but he reeled it in. He smiled at her, thanked her, and turned to collect his coat and keys. At his desk, he checked his phone one last time. Still no reply. He sent Hannibal a text saying he'd be home in about an hour and a half, two hours max, before he grabbed his things. He told himself everything with Hannibal was fine. He'd walk into the house, Hannibal would be in the kitchen or the study, busy with something that took his full attention.

He sped the entire drive home.

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BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; SATURDAY, 15:58

There still hadn't been a response by the time Will pulled his car up to the curb in front of the house. Will opened his glovebox and pulled out his gun, checking it briefly to make sure there were rounds in it. He got out of the car, shoved the gun into the back of his pants, and slammed the door. He knew he was being paranoid, but he let himself fall into it, to rely on his police training and his instincts. The first thing he did was a visual sweep of the street, but nothing looked out of place. Next, the house. From where he stood by the sidewalk, things looked fine. He told himself there was no reason to check the perimeter, instead making his way up the walkway, up the steps.

The first thing he noticed was that the lock was broken. With an unsteady hand, Will reached out and gently touched the doorknob and gave it a light push. The door swung a few inches inward with no resistance.

Will pulled his gun out. He clicked the safety off and held it with both hands, fighting his anxiety, his nerves as he pushed the door open with his foot, slow enough that it wouldn't make sound. He stepped inside. He listened.

There was soft classical music playing from the study, as there often was when Hannibal was home. Will moved down the hall, each of his steps calculated, quiet. A visual sweep of the grand room showed it was empty. He moved on, towards the study. The door was open. No one was inside. He took in a slow breath, wishing he could turn the music off, that he could hear above it and his own heartbeat drowning out the sounds he needed to hear. He continued on. The next doorway led to the dining room. He peered inside and it was as empty as the other rooms. Instead of staying in the hall, he dipped into the room and rounded the table, making his way to the side door of the kitchen. He stopped once more to listen.

He could hear soft voices. Hannibal's. Another male's. They were speaking calmly to one another. Will lowered the gun, making sure his finger wasn't on the trigger, and he stepped into the kitchen just far enough so that his shoulder remained against the door, ensuring couldn't swing shut, it couldn't make noise.

From where he stood in the doorway, he could see the back of a tall, lanky man with short black hair. Standing. Blocking his view of Hannibal, who appeared to be seated. Will quietly moved to the side, aware the door would make noise, would allow them to notice him. When Hannibal came into his line of vision, Will realized that his arms were tied behind him, around the back of one of the tall island chairs. His hair was in his face. His bottom lip was split and had dripped blood down onto his white shirt. Two buttons had been ripped open, baring chest. His eyes burned with something Will had never seen within them before, an anger that came from somewhere deep inside. He had yet to look at Will, but he knew that Hannibal knew he was there.

Will raised his gun. His finger hovered over the trigger.

“Welcome home,” the man said, his voice familiar, the voice of the man who came to his house. He had heard him when he moved, when he held the gun up. The man turned, and Will realized then that it was the missing nurse, Matthew Brown. His eyes flicked down to look at his hand, to confirm. It was wrapped tightly in bandages, only his pointer finger and thumb exposed. It was him. “We were just having a friendly conversation about power dynamics.”

“Get on the ground,” Will commanded, leveling the gun at the man from where he stood across the room.

Matthew smirked at him, turning around so he was fully facing him, and he held his hands up at his sides almost sarcastically in surrender. “Don’t worry, friend. I’m not here to hurt you.”

“Get on the fucking ground,” Will repeated, louder, angrier. He was shaking and he tried to keep himself steady, the old pain in his shoulder screaming at him already.

“No, I don’t think I will,” Matthew said as his gaze fell to Will’s unsteady hands. His smirk grew. “I can see why he thinks you aren’t ready. But I’ve looked into you. I’ve read all the cases you’ve been involved in, all the Tattlecrime articles about you. You’ve killed before.”

“No. I saved someone,” Will shot back. He stepped closer, raising the gun higher again, making sure it pointed directly at the man’s head. The man was too close to Hannibal to aim anywhere else. He was too close for Will to feel comfortable shooting.

“By murdering her father,” Matthew said with a shrug. He let his hands fall back down to his sides and he pulled another chair out, away from the island. “Come have a seat. Let’s chat.”

“Will,” Hannibal’s voice sounded just as calm as it had when Will listened through the door, just as calm as if he were speaking with an acquaintance he bumped into on the street, a stark difference from the fire in his eyes. “Please stay where you are.”

He listened to Hannibal. Will took in a slow, calming breath and shifted his stance. Beverly had once shown him how to stand, how to aim better with his old injury, and he moved into that position. It helped the shaking from the discomfort, but not his nerves. “I need you to get on the ground and put your hands behind your back, fingers splayed.”

“That would be a bit difficult, considering,” the intruder said as he waved his bandaged hand. “Did you get the gift?”

The fingers on his porch. Will flicked his gaze to Hannibal, who was still glaring up at Matthew, breathing slowly and deeply. He looked back at the nurse, his gun faltering. “Why?”

“Power dynamics. My goal is to neutralize the imbalance of power,” Matthew stated simply, as if what he said made perfect sense. “I knew flocking together would bring its troubles, so I’ve come up with a solution. I was going to tell you all about it but you never called.”

Matthew kept his body facing Will, but he stepped back and around Hannibal, around the kitchen island. He found his way to the knife block and, keeping his crooked smile aimed at

Will, he picked a knife out with his left hand. Will tracked his movements with his gun, but he waited. He knew he shouldn't kill Matthew. They needed him to know why he killed Gideon, to know how he knew the Ripper. To learn from him the Ripper's identity. Will needed him to move farther away from Hannibal.

"Oh! Don't shoot," he teased, laughing to himself. He held his hands up again in fake surrender, as he walked back closer to Hannibal. Will's finger twitched but not enough to put pressure on the trigger. "The Ripper took three fingers from me, so I deserve to take three fingers back. Don't you think?"

"How do you know the Ripper? Who is he?" Will demanded. He shifted his aim. He could maybe hit Matthew in the shoulder, incapacitate him with pain. Call Jack, get Hannibal out of the room, end everything.

Before Matthew could answer and before Will realized what was happening, Hannibal threw his chair to the side, colliding with the younger, lighter man. The knife clattered to the ground, out of his hand, obviously his non-dominant hand, and he stumbled as Hannibal crashed to the floor. The intruder scrambled to pick the knife up. Hannibal shimmied himself forward, kicking at the rungs of the chair to slide it down, to slide the back of it down far enough that his arms could be freed from it.

Matthew picked the knife up. He held it over Hannibal and began to bring it down with force. In a split-second decision, Will pulled the tirgger. Over, and over, and over, striking him squarely in the torso four, five, six times, each shot more erratic than the last. He stopped himself when Hannibal rose from the ground, arms still bound behind his back. They watched as the nurse tumbled backwards and struck the floor. The sound of wet wheezing filled the now otherwise silent kitchen. Will must have struck his lungs. He wouldn't survive.

Will looked up from the dying man on Hannibal's kitchen floor to the other, who was calmly standing there watching the boy bleed out. He stepped forward, deposited the gun on the island, and stumbled his way into Hannibal, grasping at the knotted, too tight cord around his wrists. Despite his unsteady hands, he pulled each knot loose as quickly as he could, growing more furious with each angry red cut that he uncovered. Once he was freed, Hannibal let his arms drop to his side. He took a step to turn, to face Will. He looked so calm to Will, his eyes no longer burning with rage but lightly curious as he searched Will's face, his breathing already slowing down.

"Hannibal," Will heard himself say, more a breath than a word. He reached up, pushing the man's hair out of his face, feeling his cheeks, his jaw. He slid his thumb across the bloody cut on his bottom lip. The need to have Hannibal's body against him, all around him struck him hard, making his own breath catch in his throat. He wrapped his arms around the taller man's neck and pulled him close, tight against him and he pressed his lips to Hannibal's. He allowed his desperation to bleed through, tilting his head to give Hannibal easier access as he kissed Will back just as deeply as he needed in that moment.

Hannibal pulled away first, and Will reluctantly opened his eyes to see the man staring at his mouth. He licked his own lips, tasting copper, tasting the other man's blood on his skin. Hannibal's pupils bloomed as if something in him snapped. He gripped Will's hips, pushing him backwards as he leaned down once more to crash their lips together, as if he had a

hunger only Will could satiate. Will wanted it, wanted to feel consumed by this man. His hands found their way into Hannibal's hair, gripping tight, not wanting to let him pull away a second time.

His back hit the wall, but Hannibal took another step, pressing against him with force. Will groaned into his mouth when he realized how hard Hannibal was already as he rolled his hips against him. He trailed his hands down the man's broad shoulders, his chest, then slid his fingers towards his skin where it was exposed from broken buttons. He pushed his hand into the gap, making contact with hot skin, feeling the texture of his chest hair and he couldn't help but rip the rest of the buttons free. Hannibal chuckled into his mouth and then broke their kiss, annoying Will that he'd given up his grip on the man's hair.

"Will, are you certain?" He asked, his accent thick and his voice deep, almost raspy. Will rested his forehead against his and made eye contact, wanting to see him, his want, and wanting Hannibal to see his own desires.

"Shut the hell up and fuck me, Dr. Lecter," he ordered as he pushed the shirt down over Hannibal's shoulders, exposing the expanse of his strong chest and the trail of hair that disappeared below his belt. Hannibal let go of him, but only for a moment, only to drop his shirt fully to the floor. Will ran his hands down the older man's strong arms, delighting in the feel of his skin, his hair before he pulled his arms back around him. Hannibal gripped his ass with no warning, squeezing hard with each hand, earning himself a surprised gasp. Will could hear another rumble of a laugh come from Hannibal's chest, both angering him and making his stomach tighten with want.

He pulled at Hannibal's belt buckle, unclasping it without grace, uncaring that he was a fumbling mess. Hannibal pressed kisses along his jaw, down his neck, until he sunk his teeth in, just enough that it edged on pain, a deep pressure that drew a moan from Will's lips. He ground himself against Hannibal, needing to relieve pressure, to feel friction, desperately rolling hips as his mind drifted away, as he forgot how he had been so intent on stripping the other of his clothes. Hannibal let him rut, taking his time carefully unbuttoning Will's shirt, pushing his coat and shirt off of him and onto the floor, taking his glasses off his flushed face and setting them on the counter next to them, peppering kisses and nips along his jaw and neck to keep him in the moment.

"You feel so intensely," Hannibal breathed out as he wrapped one arm around the shorter man, taking hold of the curls on the back of his head for leverage. He pulled him closer, away from the wall, and used his free hand to push Will's pants down until they fell around his ankles. Will opened his eyes, looking up through lashes to see the other still staring at him, lust and adoration and amazement swimming in his eyes. "It's beautiful to witness."

Will leaned in and ran his tongue along the split on Hannibal's lip, then gently bit down to reopen it. Hannibal groaned into his mouth as Will sucked, but then the hand in his hair pulled hard. Will let their lips part, let Hannibal pull his head back and expose his neck. His own hands found their way back to the other's pants, working the button free, lowering the zipper. He didn't wait, couldn't wait and slid his hand down taut skin, fingers following a pulsing vein until he felt Hannibal's erection. He stroked him once, slowly, wanting to savor his first touch, the new knowledge of Hannibal's length, his girth. Teeth met his neck again

and Will let out a loud moan, eyes fluttering shut as he was rewarded with another bite, and another, harder each time Hannibal bit down.

Hannibal reached between them, looping his fingers in the waistband of Will's boxers and pushing them down, freeing him from the fabric. Will did the same, pushing Hannibal's pants and boxers down just enough so that he too was exposed. There was the briefest moment where he lost contact with Hannibal's body, when the man stepped back and reached to the counter, reigniting in Will the need to be close, to be held.

"For now," he said softly into Will's ear, his accented voice raspy, deep with need. Hannibal took one of his hands and made him hold it out, palm up, so he could pour a small drizzle of olive oil. The cruet was placed back on the counter before Hannibal returned to Will, pressing him against the wall again, a slow thrust of his hips pushing his cock against the other's.

Will laid his head against Hannibal's chest as strong arms wrapped around him, a hand once again gripping the back of his hair tight, the other arm snaking around his waist to pull their bodies closer. He reached between them, his own hips rolling again as he took them both between his oiled hand and squeezed gently, stroking slowly at first. He heard a hiss escape Hannibal's lips as he bucked forward, thrusting into Will's grip, the first few erratic as if he couldn't control himself before he found a rhythm. He let his eyes fall shut, needing to block out everything else so he could focus on the sound of Hannibal's heart rate increasing, his breaths becoming harder, their skin becoming hot and sticking where they touched, the way his own knees strained to hold himself up as his body gave in to the pleasure.

"Hannibal, please," he gasped out, not even sure what he was asking for. Hannibal responded in Lithuanian, a groaned out response as his hand lowered, gripping Will's ass with enough force to hurt, to bruise. He surrendered then, the feeling of the other's cock sliding along the length of his own coupled with the possessiveness of Hannibal's body wrapped around his own bringing him to the edge. Will dragged his lips up Hannibal's chest, his neck, his jaw until he could kiss him again, taste his coppery blood, feel his life flowing from him. He moaned into the other's mouth but Hannibal pulled his hair, pulling his head back and Will felt so seen, so vulnerable as amber eyes fell on his face, onto his blood smeared, kiss swollen lips. It was enough to send him over and he gasped the other's name, his own thrusts losing rhythm as he jerked with each pulse of his orgasm, spilling onto Hannibal's stomach and chest.

Hannibal followed closely behind, grunting out words in his mother tongue as he did. Will could feel his cheeks burning red, turning hot as his body calmed down, as it began to relax, and he fully realized what they had just done. The hand gripping his hair released and dropped, fingertips dancing down his back until Hannibal was just holding his hips, not allowing Will to pull away from him. He didn't want to, but he hid then, pressing his face once more into the other's chest so he couldn't see or be seen.

He just killed a man who had been threatening Hannibal and this was his reaction. The body was in the room with them.

"Will," Hannibal kissed the top of his head. Will could feel him take in a deep breath. "I am going to hold you for a moment longer, but there are phone calls to be made."

All he could do was nod and let Hannibal hold him, hands running up and down his cooling skin. He wasn't sure how much time passed before the other started to pull back, to put a few horrible inches between their bodies. Will unwillingly looked up, glancing rapidly to check and see what Hannibal might be thinking or feeling, if he was going to start psychoanalyzing why Will would throw himself at him the moment he killed someone. Hannibal smiled at him, soft and lopsided. He looked utterly infatuated. Will looked away.

Hannibal stepped back fully then and he leaned down, pulling Will's boxers and pants up for him. Will pushed his hands away and buttoned and zipped them himself. The other picked his shirt up for him and refused to let Will snatch it away, instead keeping a peaceful composure as he helped him redress. Once Will was buttoned up and tucked in, he was given back his glasses. Hannibal pulled his own pants and boxers up, adjusting himself and clasping them and redoing his belt. He pulled his shirt up just over his shoulders, then he once again placed a kiss on Will's head before he stepped away towards the sink.

Will watched as he pulled a dish towel out of a drawer and wet it so he could clean his stomach and chest off. The towel was folded and another brought out and wetted.

"Come," he commanded softly. Will wandered over to him, focusing on the towels instead of looking up at him or over at Matthew's body, the fallen chair, the cord. Hannibal began wiping the blood off of Will's lips. The other's face was smeared, from jaw to lips, to one of his cheeks. As he was being cleaned off, he reached over and unfolded the towel to look for the tag.

Sferra.

"He had one of your dish towels," Will said quietly. "He's been coming here too."

Hannibal folded the bloody towel and did one last pass on Will's lips and jaw before folding that one and setting it down. He made no move to clean the blood from his own face. "Then it is good that you've requested I begin locking the doors."

"Yeah," he muttered. Will took in a deep breath and caught one of Hannibal's hands. He ran his fingers across the small cuts and red marks left from his being tied up, remembering how angry he'd been to see them the first time. "I should call Jack."

"Yes."

"Are you okay?"

Hannibal hummed softly and leaned forward to kiss his forehead. Will leaned into him. "I am relieved that he had a problem with continuing to help the Ripper."

Will stood there as Hannibal left, taking the two towels with him, to deposit them in the wash. He slowly walked around the island, his gaze settling on the dead man on the kitchen floor, on the answers that would remain secrets. With a sigh, Will walked over to his coat that still laid on the floor where Hannibal had dropped it. He fished his phone out of the pocket it was in and unlocked it. He dialed Jack's number.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; SATURDAY, 17:45

Local police had already arrived and cordoned off Hannibal's home. They already began the process of photographing the crime scene, of recording initial statements, photographing Hannibal's injuries, of calling out a coroner for the deceased while the FBI was on the way. Will had given his statement then walked outside to sit on the steps and wait for Jack, watching cops come and go, feeling mildly irritated when he caught sight of red hair in the crowd. Hannibal had stayed inside, cooperating fully, overseeing the activity in his kitchen.

The entire time he sat there, he tried to connect dots. The most logical explanation was that Matthew Brown had been contacted by the Chesapeake Ripper after Gideon's escape, after his stint as an imposter, and he'd been groomed to be an inside man to eventually punish Gideon for his transgressions. Matthew's actions spoke more of a man already experienced but needing more, wanting more. Maybe even jealousy over the Ripper choosing to place his infatuation on him, rather than on Matthew himself.

Had Matthew been sent by the Ripper to go after Hannibal and he changed the plans? Had he known the Ripper wanted to go after Hannibal and decided to take his kill from him, to have some control?

What had Matthew meant by telling him the Ripper doesn't think he's ready?

Will needed to go to Matthew's home, to see if it could speak to him. He'd talk to Jack about that later. Tomorrow. Monday.

Jack's tall, broad figure caught his attention as he climbed out of his car. Will stood, shoving his hands into his pockets as he waited for him. He looked concerned, a deep furrow in his brows as he made his way up the sidewalk, up the steps to meet Will.

"Jack," he said, stepping back to push the door open. The lock was too broken to latch.

"Will," Jack greeted back, noting the damage to the door.

He followed Will inside, where they made their way down the hall and to the kitchen. Hannibal was standing on the opposite side of the island from where Matthew's body laid, now covered in a white sheet, and he was speaking with an officer. Both were smiling, chatting about something other than the crime scene, until he caught sight of Will and Jack. Hannibal stepped around the officer to meet the two near the body.

"Dr. Lecter," Jack said with a nod. He crouched down and pulled the sheet back from the man's face, to confirm for himself it was actually the missing nurse. He sighed and covered him back up, then stood. "Can you go over this one more time?"

"Yes. I was in my study when I heard a commotion by my front door. I went to investigate, only to realize that this gentleman had broken into my home. He had a crowbar. I attempted and succeeded in disarming him, tossing it outside so as to keep it from being used as a weapon. That is when he sedated me," Hannibal stated. Will hadn't known until Hannibal

first told an officer. “The dose was low enough that I did not fully lose consciousness, but he was able to physically overpower me. He bound me to this chair,” Hannibal motioned to the upended chair, the discarded cord, “and we spoke for quite some time, until Will arrived. He appeared to have been waiting for Will in particular.”

“What did you discuss?” Jack asked.

“He was mainly concerned with the loss of his fingers as well as the Ripper’s inability to appreciate his addition to their shared work,” Hannibal answered truthfully. “He spoke of power imbalances in regard to his and the Ripper’s status and abilities as killers.”

“He confirmed that he was an accomplice?”

“Yes.”

Jack nodded. He studied the scene in silence for a few moments longer, then walked out to notify the FBI agents and technicians that they could come in and begin processing the crime scene. Will had already told him over the phone what happened from his perspective. He looked up at Hannibal, sorry that he had been put into this position, but thankful he was handling it so well. Hannibal seemed to sense his mood and he stepped over, once again placing an arm around him, resting his hand on his neck. He smiled at Will. Will looked at the sheet covered body. He realized that if the Matthew was cooperating with the Ripper, he may have sedated Hannibal fully. He may have taken him. Hannibal could be dead instead of standing there, looking at him, touching him.

“I’m going to go get a new lock for the front door,” Will said abruptly. He fled. He would come home once the body was gone, once the techs left, once Hannibal had scheduled a crime scene clean up. Will muttered to Jack where he was going as he rushed off, ducking under the police tape, rushing to his car. He pulled away from the curb, hooking a U-turn to avoid the mass of police and FBI vehicles, and headed off to find a hardware store.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BREAKING NEWS: MISSING NURSE SHOT DEAD

I'm reporting another death in relation to the active Abel Gideon Case. Earlier this evening, a call came in to the Baltimore PD about shots fired at the residence of Dr. Hannibal Lecter at approximately 4:50PM EST. According to my source, Will Graham fired six shots into the chest of Matthew Brown, the missing nurse from Gideon's disappearance. He was pronounced dead at 5:28PM EST, but he was most likely deceased long before. Statements from witnesses claim Brown broke into the Lecter residence and kept him as a hostage until Graham arrived on scene. I will be investigating these claims further. Check back for more updates coming soon.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; SATURDAY, 18:16

As soon as the news broke that there had been a murder at Hannibal Lecter's home, Freddie rushed to the scene. A friendly officer was kind enough to fill her in on details of her dear therapist's problems, letting her know that the 'nurse helping that Ripper asshole's dead now' so she no longer needed to worry about her safety when going to her weekly appointments. She feigned relief and snuck off to the side of the police tape, snapping a few pictures of Graham sitting on the front steps looking like a man in desperate need of a drink, then she quickly left. She had already researched Matthew Brown, just as she had the driver, the guard, and the transport company, so she knew his address. With a hope and a prayer, she sped across town in hopes that she could make it to his apartment before the FBI had the idea to raid it.

Luck was on her side. There wasn't even a cop car parked down the street. Freddie stuffed her camera and phone into her coat pockets, put on some leather gloves, then got out of the car to cross the street. It was an old building on a shit part of town; the air around it smelled strongly of chemicals, as the complex sat downwind from several factories. There were no gates, no bars on the windows, no safety features beyond regular deadbolts on the doors. It was an open plan complex with access to the stairs to go up to any of the apartments in each unit, and one of the platforms between floors looked to have been taken over by a homeless man and his tent. Brown's unit was on the ground level, and it didn't seem like anyone would care to report seeing a woman climbing through a window. Hell, someone might help if she asked in a sweet enough voice.

She checked the first window, peering in just in case the man had a roommate. No movement and it appeared to be the living room area. She moved to the second window and tried to peer in, but it was covered with blinds and a dark curtain. Just to be safe, she walked to the door and knocked twice. She waited. No answer.

Freddie peeled the old welcome mat back to check for a key. No key. She felt around the doorframe, reaching up to slide her fingers along the top. No key. Window it was.

She went back to the side of the unit and popped the screen off, setting it down carefully so it wouldn't tear. With another wish for good luck, she pushed up on the window. It gave way. The guy was either not concerned with safety or knew no one would break into his place. Once it was pushed open all the way, she grabbed the frame and jumped, then pulled herself up and kicked enough to make her way inside. Once in, she closed the window behind her.

This would have to be quick. The FBI had their incompetent moments, but that didn't mean they wouldn't show up soon.

The first thing she noticed was that his unit smelled *foul*. It was as if the chemical smell had been trapped inside and he kept rotting food and refused to take out his trash. Freddie peered around the living room that conjoined with a small kitchen. The odor didn't match what she saw. It was basic, a single couch, two milkcrates turned upside down with a piece of wood for a small coffee table, an old TV on another milkcrate with a cable box carelessly laid on the floor next to it. The kitchen looked barren, so she went to it to investigate, pulling cabinets open and peering inside. He barely had anything. One pot, one pan, some boxed pasta and cans of tuna, some mismatched hard plastic cups and plates, and what looked like thrifted spoons, knives, and a single fork. The fridge had sodas, beers, a littering of small condiment packets from takeout, some eggs and what looked like some kind of green produce that had gone bad. The freezer was no different, with an ice tray and a few frozen meals. There was mail on the countertop addressed to Brown, all of it junk mail and credit card offers. Beside the fridge was the front door, and next to that, a single jacket was hung up on a wall hook, and there was a small dirty spot on the floor where the man must have left his shoes when he got home. She frowned to herself but still took some pictures of his living space.

The next place she checked was his bathroom. It was the same as the rest: barren except for the essentials. A 3-in-1 in the shower, only a plastic liner for the curtain. He had a toothbrush and toothpaste, a razor, aftershave, and deodorant. Not even floss, no Tylenol, no other things one might expect to find. Extra toilet paper and a small bottle of bleach were under the sink. She snapped some sad pictures and made her way out, to the last door, to his bedroom.

She pushed the door open and a wall of stench hit her. Freddie almost gagged, so she pulled her sweater up over her nose, then she stepped inside.

Inside his bedroom, he had a half bunk, the bed raised up almost to the ceiling with a desk underneath. A dresser. Cluttered tables lining the walls with cardboard and plastic boxes shoved up underneath them. She wouldn't have time to go through them. She snapped a picture of the room, then walked closer to the tables to start photographing what covered them. Mostly, it looked like roadkill in different states of decay. There were fishing lures, flies, things that looked like he was trying to emulate Graham in some way. There were surgical tools, scalpels, forceps, scissors. One of the unidentifiable, dead animals was held open with a retractor, its organs taken out and laid beside it, rotting. She took a picture of that, close up.

She moved on to the desk. He had an older desktop computer. She poked the mouse to see if it was on and the screen popped up. She moved the cursor to click on the singular profile icon

and it opened up to show he had been on a web browser, looking at an article about Gideon's disappearance and death. There were more tabs open. She took a picture of the screen, then clicked through and quickly took pictures of each tab. They were articles, some even from Tattlecrime, all about Graham, the FBI, the Chesapeake Ripper, Gideon, Lecter, as well as medical pages that detailed autopsies and surgical techniques. On top of the desk were stacks of papers, more articles printed out, with handwritten notes scribbled all across them. She snapped a few pictures, then began to read.

At the top of the pile, most of the articles were about Graham. From his own abduction and display all the way back to an article from his days in Louisiana as a cop, just his name circled midway through the article that had nothing to do with him specifically. Under that, she recognized Lecter's paper about social exclusion, heavily written on and highlighted, some lines scratched out completely. She flipped those papers over and went closer to the bottom of the pile, trying to get a quick read on his change in thoughts. Near the beginning, it was mostly articles about Gideon. Gideon's claims of being the Ripper, of his trial and incarceration for his family's murder, of his accomplishments as a surgeon before he was even a criminal. Underneath that, he had printed papers about Joe Metheny and his murders, of the DC Snipers, of James David Martin with the words "strangulation is powerful" scrawled across it in marker. She took another picture of that. Brown seemed obsessed with serial murderers and she wondered if he had been the one to seek out the Ripper, or if the Ripper knew and sought him out. Freddie wondered how he passed the interviews to get a job to work with the criminally insane. She wondered if his obsession helped land him his job.

Moving on, she went to the dresser. The top two drawers were pairs of pants, t-shirts, socks, and underwear that all looked like they would fit a slim, taller young man. She opened the bottom drawer and was met with a rainbow of women's underwear, with a few pairs of boxers in different sizes and colors. She took a picture.

Freddie checked the time on her phone. She'd been there for almost fifteen minutes. She closed the dresser drawer and made her way back out into the living room, pulling the door shut behind her. She went back to the window and turned around, shoving one leg out first, then the other, and sliding down to the outside, where she lowered her sweater and took in a deep breath of fresher air. The window was closed and she put the screen back as she'd found it, then turned to check her surroundings.

Still no police, no FBI. She didn't want to risk being caught either way, so she rushed back to her car.

She had three options. The first, she would go home and update her readers. The second, she could drive to the BSHCI and try to interview Brown's coworkers to see if they had any information they'd share with her. The third, she could show up at Frederick Chilton's house and ask him how Brown was chosen to transport Gideon and if he was aware of his obsession with killers.

Before she drove off, she reached into the back of her car and retrieved her laptop case. She pulled it out and opened it, turned the hotspot on her phone on, and decided she'd do option one and attempt option three. She made a few quick edits to an article she'd already drafted about the Chesapeake Ripper and hit upload. Once the page loaded, she closed the laptop and

tossed it into her passenger seat and pulled away from the curb. It couldn't hurt to drive to Chilton's house, hopefully beating the cops at their own game once again.

IN PLAIN SIGHT: IS THE CHESAPEAKE RIPPER A WELL KNOWN FIGURE?

The Chesapeake Ripper is someone hiding in plain sight. After weeks of investigation, interviewing sources, and reporting to you, there's no other conclusion I can come to. To prove my theory, and to refresh old readers and inform new, I am going to go over the timeline of his known killings. I ask you to keep an open mind because, although I have been quite convinced that a favorite here at Tattlecrime has been nefariously involved in some way, I now believe that Will Graham is unaware. In over his head. Incompetent. His only crime has been becoming a target of psychopathic killer, a favorite piece in a game that has been in play for years before his involvement. This doesn't excuse behaviors and actions that point towards a darkness that shouldn't be trusted, but my focus on him has been a distraction. I fear that I, and in turn you as the readers, have had the wool pulled over our eyes by the Ripper himself, playing the role he has cast for us perfectly.

I will begin with his first known killings, his first sounder of three, committed within nine days. His first victim was a preacher named Walter Anderson, found in a church in Minneapolis, his tongue cut from his body and placed in a Bible held in his hands and organs missing. His second victim was Olivia Williams in Essex, carved up to look like a sacrificial lamb, organs missing. A clear pattern was taking form. By the time his third victim, Lincoln Davis, was discovered in Baltimore, it became clear that each murder was the result of the same killer committed to mutilating his victims while alive and removing organs with surgical precision. Local precincts deferred to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, which placed Agent Jack Crawford on the case. Despite their best efforts, there has been no connection found between these victims, even to this day.

He then became inactive. For eighteen months, no new murders that could be attributed to his level brutality and artistry were discovered. Theories floated around, from the belief that the media had scared him into hiding, to profilers claiming whoever it was happened to be someone who traveled for work and they had left the country, to cult activity that involved cycles of the moon or some ancient calendar. People across the nation were warned to be on the lookout for another murder, and no one knew who would be struck down next.

The next three murders dispelled all three theories listed above. Either to prove everyone wrong for fun or to garner himself a nickname, each murder from the second sounder happened within the Baltimore, Maryland area, and all these murders were committed within three days.

His fourth victim was Khan Lee, strung up by his own intestines, missing his kidney and liver. The fifth victim was Carlton Jones, flayed open and laid across the grave of his late wife, missing his lungs. The sixth, Patricia Duncan, found in an abandoned schoolhouse completely dismembered, her entire abdominal cavity cleared of its organs. As with the first sounder, each of these victims' organs were removed with precise, surgical skill. Again, none of these victims seemed connected in any way to one another, nor to the first three victims. He

was then dubbed the Chesapeake Ripper by the media during another frenzy, and his name has since become both respected and feared.

By this point, investigators were becoming desperate. They were reaching out to consultants outside of the FBI for help. He became the subject of paper after paper written by psychiatrists, forensic psychologists, self-proclaimed detectives, and true crime writers. With each new kill, the media began pushing the narrative that this killer would outsmart law enforcement, that he would become a legend much like the man who murdered Elizabeth Short and the Zodiac Killer, his identity never to be confirmed but to be narrowed down to a few high standing members of society with a penchant for flair and medical knowledge, only to potentially be named after his death.

Eleven months went by before his next victim was found. Nicholas White was found in a warehouse, hung upside down by his feet with his arms splayed like an inverted cross. An eighth victim came two days later, a man named Jeremy Olmstead, helpfully nicknamed the Wound Man, as his display used a series of tools from his very own workshop to mimic the well-known Wound Man medical drawing. Both men were missing organs.

After Olmstead's murder, the Chesapeake Ripper fell inactive once more. At the time, Agent Crawford was becoming desperate to catch him before he struck again. We found out mere weeks ago that he became so desperate that he sent an agent-in-training by the name of Miriam Lass into the field to try and track down the Ripper, only for her to end up listed as a missing person. Her body was not discovered and denial that the Ripper was involved hung over her case, but she was widely believed to be his ninth victim, the third in his third sounder.

Almost two years passed before the Chesapeake Ripper struck again. This time, no one was aware that the next four murders were committed by his hand. These cases should be familiar to you, as I've covered them extensively. The first murder was Cassie Boyle, left displayed in a field in Minnesota on an antler mount. Her organs were not removed surgically, but rather ripped from her body. Will Graham did not believe this was the work of the Minnesota Shrike, but a copycat. The second was Marissa Schurr, killed after the Minnesota Shrike was dispatched by Graham, so her murder could not be attributed to him, even falsely. The next was Dr. Donald Sutcliffe, a neurologist who was working with Dr. Hannibal Lecter to diagnose Will Graham, but he failed to do so before he was found murdered in a way that mimicked Georgia Madchen's kill. The last kill was Madchen herself, burnt to a crisp in her isolate chamber, which was originally thought to be a tragic accident. Each of these murders were eventually considered done by the same copycat murderer.

During this time, two major developments were ongoing. The first was that special agent Will Graham was displaying increasingly erratic behavior. Not only had he been at each scene of the copycat murders at one point or another, but he had developed an unhealthy relationship with the daughter of the Minnesota Shrike, Abigail Hobbs.

The second was that Dr. Abel Gideon made international headlines when he claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper. The lack of known deaths attributed to the Ripper during the entirety of Gideon's incarceration, his surgical background, and his known pathology all but lined up perfectly to prove his claims. It wasn't until the discover of Miriam Lass' arm did anyone

suspect that he was either lying for attention, or a man confused by suggestions and improper therapy techniques.

Once her arm was discovered, Gideon believed he had been manipulated into falsely confessing. Because of this, he staged an escape from his captivity during a transfer. While he was out, Gideon went on his own spree in an act of retribution, to punish each psychiatrist he viewed as his oppressor. I became a firsthand witness to his psychosis, when I was tasked with keeping the director of the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Dr. Frederick Chilton, alive during and after a harrowing surgery where Gideon removed several of his organs. He was ultimately captured, shot by none other than Will Graham. Both men ended up hospitalized, Gideon for his gunshot wound, and Graham due to a fever that was blamed for his deteriorating mental state.

After Madchen's death, in a desperate attempt to prove that she was the one involved in at least two of the copycat murders, Graham left the hospital early and ended up kidnapping Abigail Hobbs from the care home she was living in and taking her back to Minnesota, to the home she believed she would some day die in. During this trip, Abigail either ran from Graham or was kidnapped by the Chesapeake Ripper--he returned to Virginia without her. Days later, reports came in that Graham vomited Hobbs' ear up into his sink at his home. He turned himself in and he was subsequently booked for the copycat murders. Graham vehemently denied these allegations.

During his transport to the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane, Graham escaped. It is believed this act was done without aid, as he left each worker alive. His last known destination was Dr. Hannibal Lecter's office, who claims he attempted to stop Graham from leaving. He then went missing for a total of eight days.

While Graham was missing, the body of Abigail Hobbs was discovered in a display reminiscent of the murders correctly attributed to the Chesapeake Ripper. As with many of the other murders, Hobbs had organs surgically removed. It seemed as if the Ripper was taking responsibility for the murder, as if he believed, if nothing else, one's murders should be correctly attributed to the correct killer, never to be claimed by another. Four days later, the second and third victims in the current sounder were discovered, one of whom was Will Graham himself. Alive.

Seventeen days later, Dr. Abel Gideon went missing during his transport from the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane to the Danville State Hospital in Pennsylvania. The following day, his body was discovered displayed in a church, along with the guard from his transport. It was initially suspected that the Chesapeake Ripper was seeking to punish Gideon for claiming to be him, but investigators determined that a second killer had at least assisted the Ripper, if not fully committed it for him. The driver was found mere days later, driven off the side of the road in the transport van. This is not attributed to the Chesapeake Ripper, but the second killer.

This leads us the present.

As per my most recent Breaking News, the second killer is now believed to be the nurse from Gideon's transport, Matthew Brown. He broke into Dr. Hannibal Lecter's home earlier this evening, holding him hostage in his kitchen until the arrival of Will Graham, who dispatched

Brown in the line of duty. (I will have an update regarding my findings in his home as soon as possible. Check back at a later date!)

Now, back to my newest theory. I had initially been looking in the wrong direction, believing Graham himself was working with the Chesapeake Ripper. Everything lined up too perfectly and when the FBI closed in on Graham, Abigail Hobbs' display seemed like a too conveniently timed confession to clear his name. However, the more I look into this case, the more it seems like Graham is just another pawn. He is being used, just as Miriam Lass was used, to taunt Agent Jack Crawford, the FBI, and law enforcement at large. Graham is a useful tool, led by the Ripper to believe he is somehow special.

Whoever the Chesapeake Ripper is, he is a chameleon. He fits no known profile, as claimed by many highly esteemed profilers and psychiatrists, and he does not seem to have a need to follow a specific modus operandi. He can move between worlds, with intimate knowledge of active cases with details not even released here on Tattlecrime. This leads me to believe it is someone who either works within the FBI itself or has consulted heavily with them for at least several years. I have my suspicions, but I dare not push farther than I already have in previous articles. I firmly believe he is hiding in plain sight and directly involved in his own case.

As always, please leaves any questions, comments, or theories below. If you have any useful tips, call my hotline at any hour of the day or night. Any information has the potential to be useful information.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the delay in chapter updates. I rearranged my outline and opted to use this chapter as a sort of intermission, to bring some things together. I had to bullshit *a lot* of things about the Chesapeake Ripper but still fit it into his timeline of kills; I tried to stay as close to canon as possible. If any of his kills are wrong, or there's actually a list of his victims vs just summaries of how many / general timeframe / general locations, let me know!

devitatio

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; SUNDAY, 11:18

Chilton sat at his desk, fuming silently to himself. The previous night, Brown had shown up at Lecter's home and attacked him, then he was killed by Will Graham. Of course that meant he had to spend the night answering phone calls and questions. Reporters showed up at his house, jackals at the carcass, expecting him to have all the answers. Now, after a relatively sleepless night, he had to come in to work on a Sunday so that he could oversee the entire mess, *again*.

It was unfair. Gideon was supposed to be comfortably sat in some other poor sap's hospital, making *them* miserable, while he went about his day-to-day enjoying the peace and waiting for the lawyers to say everything had been taken care of. He even had planned to write a book about his harrowing experience of being kidnapped and cut up while awake, by one of his own patients no less. A warning to other psychiatrists, a thriller for the common man. Instead, Brown had taken it upon himself to kidnap the man, the guard, the driver, and try to emulate the Chesapeake Ripper himself. It made no sense. The kid was weird, but no weirder than the guard who always brings in days-old donuts, or the nurse who walks backwards away from the patient rooms even when she's the one who locked them from the outside.

A knock on his door made him jump. Chilton cleared his throat and gathered himself, then called for whoever it was to come in. The door opened and in walked Agent Jack Crawford, flanked by Dr. Alana Bloom. He supposed it would make sense that Graham and Lecter wouldn't be on the case, but *Bloom*? Chilton offered them both a charming smile.

"Agent Crawford. Dr. Bloom. Welcome, come sit," he said, motioning to the chairs across from his desk.

"I'm sorry to barge in on you again, Dr. Chilton," Jack claimed as he seated himself, taking his hat off his head and setting it down on the desk. The man also had a briefcase, which he set down next to his chair on the floor, upright. He must have just arrived, come to oversee more agents looking at the same files, the same information they'd seen when Brown was just a missing person. "We just have a few more questions."

Alana seated herself next to Jack, adjusting herself so that she was sitting up proper, tall. Trying to look intimidating. Chilton smiled at her, then directed all of his attention back on Jack. "Yes, of course. I am here simply to be of all the help I can."

"Great. Now, you directly oversaw Brown's hire?" Jack asked. Chilton's face dropped and he shook his head.

"No. I sign off on employees, seeing as I am the director, but our human resources department does the hiring. Carol in HR would be able to answer more questions about his hiring process than I," he said, offering more information this time than he had the other times he'd answered the same question. For a bureau of investigation, they repeated themselves quite often.

“Did you ever notice any odd behavior from him?” Alana asked, her voice softer than Jack’s. He must be playing bad cop, she the good one, for whatever reason they would need to.

Chilton shifted in his seat, leaning back and shrugging his shoulders. “Dr. Bloom, my employees work with dangerous criminals. They all act odd. In fact, it would be stranger for one of them to be chipper and all smiles than it would be for someone to act paranoid, or erratic, or angry.”

“Fair enough,” Jack agreed, accepting his answer. “Why was he chosen for the transport?”

“He volunteered,” Chilton said. It was the plain truth. The kid had volunteered and he hadn’t questioned it. “Not many people were willing, considering what had happened the last time Gideon was transported somewhere.”

“Gideon was paralyzed, Dr. Chilton,” Alana pointed out. “He could hardly be capable of escaping on his own.”

“Superstition saves lives here at the BSHCI,” Chilton offered with a shrug. “It seems all the attendings who refused to go were right.”

“Do you have any idea why Brown would kidnap the man who claimed to be the Chesapeake Ripper, then kill him and display him in a way that paid homage to the Ripper?” Jack asked, more serious this time. In all honesty, he didn’t know why. It boggled his mind, but then again, there were women who to this day would throw themselves at Charles Manson, whole forums online where people idolized Ted Bundy. People were sometimes downright strange, psychology be damned.

“No,” he answered concisely.

Jack picked the case up that he had carried in, opening it to retrieve a folder. He set the case back down and leafed through the file before finding the right page, turning it around, and setting it on the desk in front of Chilton. Inside were several sleeves of printed pages detailing Brown, his death, and his timeline of known actions since the day the van disappeared. There were also several photographs, a few of his deceased body in Lecter’s kitchen, and a collection fo strange photos that showed mutilated animals, several pairs of panties lined up with number placards next to them, pictures of documents with handwriting all over them, an entire plastic bin full of half used vials of sedatives most likely stolen from the BSHCI. It appeared to be personal effects from Brown’s home. Chilton frowned, sorting through them. It screamed serial killer, and a messy one at that.

“Can you tell me again if Brown has displayed any odd behavior?” Jack asked.

“Not to be combative, Agent Crawford, but … how would I be aware of this if police are not? He’s … he’s had to have had victims prior to Gideon,” Chilton tossed the pictures back down into the folder. He no longer wanted to look at them. First, Gideon. Now, Brown. He should have chosen another line of work. “His fingerprints are on file from his criminal background check to work here.”

“Locally. We’ve only been able to tentatively identify two possible victims, one from rural Virginia and another from Delaware,” Jack informed him, his tone stern.

Chilton looked back and forth between the two sitting before him. Alana looked concerned, untrusting. Jack had his poker face on. He was surely not suggesting that he knew of Brown’s proclivities, that he would *want* Brown to dispatch Gideon to make his life easier. No, had he wanted that, he would have put Gideon in gen pop the day the judge sent him back to this godforsaken hospital and the guards would have looked the other way in honor of the poor nurse he killed. All he wanted was for Gideon to be gone, to bother someone else. He rubbed his hands on his pants, nervous, his palms feeling sweaty.

“Dr. Bloom can tell you how easily certain people slip through the cracks, Agent Crawford. As you know from employee records, the kid was always on time, he volunteered extra shifts regularly, never missed a day off work. As far as I was concerned, he was a good worker, and that’s all I need to know about my people. If they’re here on the clock and following the proper procedures, they will have a decent career here. What they do in their free time has never been and never will be my business,” Chilton said.

“And his interest in Gideon after he returned wasn’t a red flag?” Jack asked.

“Agent Crawford, Abel Gideon mutilated me. I spent my days avoiding his hall at all costs. I did not want him returned to my hospital,” Chilton declared with a defiant tone.

Whatever the reason, that seemed to satisfy Jack’s curiosity. The man nodded, then reached over and gathered up his folder of Brown’s horrors to put back into his case. He plucked his hat up and placed it back on his head, standing. Alana stood as well and offered Chilton a smile. He did not stand, as he had just pointed out that he had previously been mutilated.

“Thank you for your time, Dr. Chilton,” Jack said. “I’d like to say we’ll get out of your hair soon, but this investigation may take some time.”

“Yes. I’m quite aware. If he really was working with the Chesapeake Ripper, it may never be solved,” Chilton said with a grimace. “The Ripper may be far too intelligent to slip up, even with a rogue helper.”

They said their goodbyes and the two left his office. Chilton sighed, visibly deflating and melting into his chair. The Ripper seemed like he was going to continually bite him in the ass. It was probably punishment for thinking Gideon could have been him, as if it was his fault a narcissistic, compulsive liar decided to latch onto an idea for attention. He glanced at his watch and realized it was nearing lunch time. Maybe he’d go scrounge around the employee lounge, see if there were any decent looking donuts there.

WOLF TRAP, VIRGINIA; SUNDAY, 15:22

Will sat on the front steps of his porch, watching his dogs run around with one another. Buster was the only one not playing, instead choosing to sit on one of his feet. He idly pet him, mostly just to feel the texture of his short fur shifting under his touch. For the first time

in weeks, he felt alone. It hadn't bothered him before, not in any real way. It was passive loneliness. A lack of expectations, a way to float through life avoiding disappointments, avoiding rejection once he grew attached to someone. The difference this time was, he was the one creating the space. Not only had he been selfish enough to put Hannibal's life in danger, he *threw himself* at the man right there in the room with the body of a man he'd just killed.

Whatever Hannibal had thought of him before, it would fundamentally change. It most likely already had. In much more eloquent language than Alana, he would begin telling him that he was unstable. Professional curiosity would reign. Discussions would begin between Hannibal, Alana. Chilton. Jack.

At least he would get out of attending Hannibal's dinner party.

His cell phone buzzed in his pocket. Will took it out only to see that it was a text from Hannibal. He didn't read it, instead tossing his phone onto the porch just out of his reach. He returned to petting Buster, scratching into his short fur to feel the little spikes of hair poking under his fingernails. It was calming. He missed this. He missed the dogs, the peace of isolation in the woods, the scent of leaves beginning to rot under the layers of newly fallen golds and reds. He missed teaching. He missed random crime scene consultations, before Jack reeled him into working so closely with him and the FBI. His phone buzzed again. He gave it a dirty look.

The crunching of gravel alerted him, the dogs. They began making warning noises, not quite barking yet, until the familiar shape of Alana's car turned into the driveway. Will whistled so they dogs would come to him and stay out of the way of her car. Once she put it in park, he whistled again and they rushed over as she got out. He rose from the porch and stepped down the stairs, taking a few steps towards her as she leaned down to greet the pack.

"Hey," he said, shoving his hands into his pockets.

"Hey, Will," she said back with a smile, before going back to petting the dogs until they were satisfied and began wandering off. "Did they enjoy themselves?"

"Every tree's been marked, every loose stick chewed," Will said with a tight-lipped smile. He looked away from her, watching as Winston ran with a toy, two others chasing him to try and get it from him. "How did it go?"

"As expected," Alana said with a light sigh. She tucked her hands into the sleeves of her sweater and crossed her arms, chilled in the fall air. "Jack mentioned Frederick had an interest in you?"

Will laughed softly and looked up at the sky, trying to hide his exasperation. "Yeah. That whole *professional curiosity* so many people have about me. Wants to write a paper on my empathy disorder."

"Ah," she fully sighed that time. He'd made her feel awkward, but he didn't mind. Didn't care. "Did Jack tell you about Brown yet? What they found?"

“No,” Will said, returning his attention to her. “Pretty sure Jack’s avoiding me.”

“I don’t think he’s avoiding you. He’s … feeling responsible. Said you refused police protection and if I was hearing between the lines correctly, he’s angry with himself for not giving you one regardless of what you wanted,” she said, trying to maintain a therapist’s tone rather than allowing her own judgement in. Will heard it anyway. She was right, so was Jack. There should have been more protection than a basic deadbolt.

“Yeah, well, what’s done is done,” Will grumbled out.

“Are you okay?” Alana asked, studying him. He watched her for a minute, then turned away to watch the dogs. More time than he thought must have passed, because she moved closer to him and reached out to touch both of his arms as she stood in front of him. “You’ve had a long year. It’s fine if you aren’t okay. You shouldn’t be. But you will be. Brown could be the key to actually catching the Ripper, Will.”

Will felt his face betray him, tightening into a grimace that tried to hide how stressed he was. He almost missed the days his brain was on fire, when he could lose time and be hours, days ahead, closer to either death or being done with this whole shit hand he had been dealt. After taking in a deep breath and closing his eyes to center himself, he nodded. He nodded again, not yet forming words. He felt Alana wrap her arms around him in a tight hug, and he let himself lean into it, into her. The last hug she’d given him had been one of pity, a woman afraid of a man losing his mind. This one was at least better. She was worried because of external factors. Serial murderers, a serial murderer stalker.

“I *killed* the key to catching the Ripper, Alana,” Will said, fully aware of the regret in his voice. She rubbed his back and then let go, just enough to look up at him with that sad, pitying smile. He looked away.

“You protected Hannibal, and yourself,” Alana offered her kind words. She let go then, returning to hugging her own self for warmth. Will considered inviting her inside, but his house was not much better. He had been keeping the heat on only enough to keep the pipes from freezing during the nights, and it didn’t occur to him to turn it up when he arrived. As much as he missed this place, it still no longer felt like home. He sighed.

“What did they find out about Brown?” Will asked to change the subject back. To avoid relationship talk, or more concerns. “I would have thought Jack’d want me to look at his place.”

Alana slowly brought her shoulders up in a shrug as she opened her mouth, but he could tell she was choosing her words before she spoke. She was considering whether she should talk about Jack or Brown. “Items in his home implicate him in at least two murders of his own. Frederick didn’t seem … too shocked. He seemed defensive, when Jack showed him.”

Applesauce came over to them and Will knelt down to pet her, to ruffle the fur around her collar as he thought. The Ripper working with another known killer seemed plausible, but the fact that Brown seemed to have begun putting his own mark on their works together without approval meant they hadn’t known one another for very long. It could even be a partnership of necessity for the Ripper, one he didn’t want but needed.

“You think Chilton knew?” Will asked, glancing up at her. A slight look of surprise passed over her features before she schooled them. She hadn’t considered that yet, only that Chilton was upset that another murderer may have bested him.

“I think Frederick is upset that his career isn’t as fulfilling as he’d hoped,” Alana said after a pause, now with a smile. Will laughed and stood after one last good pet for Applesauce. “I think he regrets not going into private practice.”

“Can’t really blame the guy. I feel like I should have just stayed an instructor. We’d both have two kidneys,” he said, trying to sound as if he was joking, but she didn’t appreciate it judging by the sad look she gave him. He whistled to the dogs and they came running, and the two of them made their way over to her car. She opened the back to let the pack in, and Will watched as one by one they jumped in. “I’m going to try to spend more time here. Take the dogs off your hands.”

“Will,” Alana reached over and gently touched his arm. “It’s fine. Really. I still feel like I owe you. Plus, no one in their right mind would try breaking into a house with eight dogs.”

He chuckled and helped her shut the dogs into the car, minding their tails and feet. He didn’t mention to her how the Ripper was able to break into his house and the dogs allowed him. Maybe even welcomed him in. “Still. I miss them.”

“I don’t blame you. They’re all sweethearts,” she said as she got into the driver’s seat. Alana turned the car on and hit the button to roll the window down. She then shut the door and looked up at Will, who had stepped back and shoved his hands back into his pockets. “You headed home?”

Will frowned slightly and looked down, then forced himself to smile instead. He really should head home. Hannibal had been held hostage by a killer yesterday, and here he was, avoiding him to wallow in self pity. “Yeah. Soon. Might clean the yard up first.”

“You want to keep the dogs a bit longer?” She asked, looking away from him and scanning his yard. He appreciated that she seemed just as concerned about him being there alone as he was.

“No. Have a good evening, Alana,” he said, backing away from the car and turning to walk away, towards the house. He held a hand out in a half wave, then jogged up the steps of the porch. He glanced at his phone, but left it where it sat. He’d pick it up after Alana left. Instead, he turned and watched her back out of the driveway. One last wave and she was gone, down the road to her own home.

Now that he was alone, fully alone, Will closed his eyes. He took in a deep breath and just listened. No dogs, no footsteps in the fallen leaves, no yowls of imaginary animals calling for his attention. No stags with feathered haunches standing just beyond reach. No stag man to whisper to him. There was a chickadee singing, the rapid click-chirping of some cardinals, wind in the dying leaves still clinging desperately to their branches. It was strange, how used to chaos he had become while he was sick. It almost made him feel better about his actions during that time. He really wasn’t sure what all he would have done differently. He just wouldn’t have had the excuse.

Will leaned down and picked his phone up. Only two texts from Hannibal, the same two from earlier. Hannibal missed him at breakfast, which meant he was surprised when he realized Will had left before he woke up. The second was to tell him he would not be home until dinnertime because he had business to tend to. Will glanced at the time on his phone. It was almost four. He should leave now so he'd be home around six. Whatever the full subtext to Hannibal's messages were, Will knew if he wasn't home this evening that the man would show up at his house. He wondered if he should wait then. Have the impending discussion on his own turf so he could send Hannibal away rather than being the one who had to leave.

With a sigh, he made sure to lock the front door, then stomped off to his car. He'd go home. They'd talk. Everything would be fine.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; SUNDAY, 16:53

Jack sat in his office, his desk strewn with files, photographs, reports, but he was focused on his computer. Freddie Lounds had somehow gotten into Brown's apartment prior to any of his agents. Only a few hours after she put up her article about the Chesapeake Ripper, she posted a slideshow article that included details about Brown that he had wanted kept from the public. The fly making gear, the dissected small mammals, the endless stacks of papers with notes scribbled all over them. All the information they could have kept from the media so that they could use it when interviewing suspects that might possibly be connected to either Brown or the Ripper. At this rate, a real news outlet might pick up on what she'd posted and start throwing out theories that could harm the investigation, could muddy witness pools, could lead to an uptick in false confessions.

Prurnell had been calling him most of the day. She'd gotten word not only about Will shooting Brown, but the package of fingers left at Will's home, the Tattlecrime article claiming it's someone inside the FBI, and the shit he was currently reading through. He had to inform Will he was officially off the case, that Prurnell herself said not to even bother with a post-shooting psych eval, that he'd stay off the case and any others moving forward until the Ripper was caught or killed. Jack had his own suspicions, but nothing was concrete. There was no tangible proof, and Will deserved the benefit of doubt with everything he'd gone through, with all the help he's provided.

He would tell Will tomorrow. Let him show up to work, let him talk to the lab, throw some theories out first.

With a heavy sigh, Jack clicked to the end of the article. He rubbed his eyes and leaned back in his chair. He should be at home with Bella, but she'd know he was distracted. She wouldn't say anything, but he'd feel her mood shift. He'd feel guilty. She'd reassure him that everything was fine. He'd overcompensate. She'd get frustrated with his attempts to fix things that she'd claim didn't need fixing.

Jack picked his phone up. He dialed the hotline number underneath the last photograph that featured a drawer stuffed with random undergarments. He was glad she at least didn't dig through the drawer to find the trophies he had hidden beneath.

“Hello, this is Freddie Lounds with Tattlecrime,” a woman’s voice said with a smooth, eager tone.

“Lounds,” Jack barked out. He knew she’d recognize his voice. “Care to explain how you have intimate knowledge of Matthew Brown’s home?”

“I have my ways,” she said without worry. “Seems like he was a busy boy. How’d he slip past you for so long?”

“Miss Lounds, I’m going to need you to come give a statement,” Jack said, and knowing she’d refuse otherwise, he lied, “We found a curly red hair in Brown’s apartment. Seems like a perfect match and we just need an official statement from you about why and when you were there.”

There was a long pause from her end of the line this time, before she spoke again. “Fine. Tomorrow.”

“Bright and early,” he directed, then he ended the call. Jack tossed his phone down onto his desk and clicked back to her previous article where she claimed whoever the Ripper was had to be someone close, if not within, the FBI. He read it for a third time that evening.

redire

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; SUNDAY

In the early morning hours, Hannibal had felt Will slip out of bed and quietly leave the room. He had laid there and listened to the faint sounds of a door closing, the shower in the guest room turning on then off, to soft, socked footsteps padding from the room down towards the stairs where they became so quiet he could no longer hear them. Will was running off, hiding. It wasn't long before he had heard the sound of an engine turning over, and then he waited patiently for an appropriate amount of time to pass before he too rose from the bed. He knew Will would not return for several hours, if not days, but he would return.

He decided then that he would make the most of the day.

Hannibal bathed and dressed, choosing a more casual outfit of slacks and a red knit sweater, something he would have more range of movement while wearing. He descended the stairs, returning to the kitchen where the crime scene cleanup service had done a decent, but not to his standard, job, and set about making himself coffee and a light yet high protein breakfast. Once he was well fed and the dishes cleaned, dried, and placed back in their proper cabinets and drawers, he made a quick round to ensure his exterior doors were all locked. They were, just as he knew they would be, since Will would never again leave the house without making sure each window and door was locked, but there was nothing wrong with double checking. He then returned to his kitchen and made his way to the pantry, where he moved his butcherblock counter out of the way and pulled up the hatch that led to his basement. He made his way down the stairs and flipped on the lights.

His first task was to heat up a small, pre-prepared tray of soft foods. He carried it unceremoniously to a room in the back, nearest to where Will had once spent time, and knocked on the door twice. He unlocked and slid open a slot in the doorway and waited for another, empty tray to come out. He took it and replaced it with the new tray and he watched as it disappeared from his view. He closed and locked the slot once more. The tray was then taken to the sink next to the refrigerator where he kept the food. He washed it, dried it, and placed it on a stack that laid face down on a shelf above the sink.

He then made his way to where he kept cleaning supplies, his plastic suits, his gloves. Once a set of protective gear was donned, he took upstairs the proper necessities to ensure not a single bit of Matthew Brown remained in his kitchen. Hannibal spent enough time cleaning that the sun had risen by the time he finished, casting golden streaks across the now immaculate floor. Nothing was thrown out in bins, instead he returned the supplies downstairs and whatever did not need to be burned was put away, and the rest placed into a bag and deposited in his incinerator.

Before he went back upstairs, he selected a few pieces of meat from his dwindling stock to place in the refrigerator in his pantry to thaw. He turned the lights off and made his way back upstairs. The meat was put away, then the hatch closed, the countertop returned to its rightful place. He noted the time; it was still midmorning. It was not yet time to message Will.

He went about a normal Sunday routine instead. He planned the weeks' meals up until Friday. Saturday was the party and there was no need to plan anything, as it had already been done. Cleaning, reorganizing. Hannibal found himself in the guest room eventually, sitting on the bed, holding one of Will's shirts to his nose. He gathered up what small amount of clothes that were left in that room and hung them in his own room, next to the clothes that had naturally found their way into his own closet over time. Once he had finished that task, he left the house to pick up any ingredients he was lacking for their weekly meals. It was mostly an uneventful trip. A few familiar faces in the employees at his favorite shops, but otherwise, no conversation. No light.

When he arrived back home, he checked the time once more. It was midafternoon. He sent Will a text to let him know he missed him that morning. He put the groceries away then, when he realized there was no response, he sent a second text to let him know the house would be empty until the evening time. If Will would not return home, he could finish some preparations for the upcoming weeks.

Exterior doors were locked once again and he reentered the pantry, this time locking the door from inside. Hannibal moved the counter away once more, opened the hatch, and descended. He turned the lights on. He turned on music, a collection of pieces by Henry Purcell, loud enough for his guest to enjoy. Gloves were donned and he began pulling empty plastic bins out of a small storage area. He first wiped each one down, inside and out, as well as their lids, with medical grade cleaning wipes. After a second pass of each container, he was satisfied. He took each one to a table and laid them out next to one another. Each item he placed within the first had meaning and were pertinent to his plans. The second and third boxes were filled with items of necessity; hospital gowns, medical supplies, surgical supplies, a pair of clothing kept safe. Once he finished packing, he secured their lids and moved the boxes, taking them to the doorway that led to the access tunnels beyond. He stacked them neatly by the door, then disposed of his gloves.

His music was killed. The lights shut off.

Hannibal returned upstairs. He once again went through the motions of closing the hatch, replacing the countertop, making sure that things were as they should be. Unnoticeable. He unlocked the pantry and stepped back into the kitchen, only to see Will standing near the island, a blank look on his face as he stared at the floor where a body had lain the day before. The briefest flicker of a worry passed through him, the thought that Will had perhaps gone into the pantry only to realize it was locked, but he had chosen to ignore the feeling. He decided he would handle any questions if Will indicated that he'd noticed anything out of the ordinary when they came, if they came at all.

"Will," Hannibal said warmly, moving across the kitchen to meet him. He slid an arm around his waist from behind, hugging him back against his own body. He smelled of Alana, quite strongly. Less so, the dogs. "Did you enjoy your day with your pack?"

"Alana had to meet with Jack," Will said, his voice distracted, gaze still fixed on the floor. "Brown's killed before. Before Gideon."

Hannibal hummed softly. He'd suspected that the young man had told the truth when he had claimed the same during the rude interruption to his meal preparations. "You theorize that he

was then chosen by the Ripper for his needed and practiced skills?"

"Yeah," the other said, finally tearing his eyes away from the floor. He turned and studied the tie Hannibal wore, but he offered him a smile. "Your day?"

"An easy Sunday," Hannibal answered with a smile of his own for Will. "Would you care for dinner?"

Will nodded. They parted, Hannibal moving to the refrigerator to begin pulling out ingredients. If Will had noticed the pantry being locked, he did not mention it, not through the preparation of dinner, not through the consumption of their meal, nor through their ritual of cleaning up the kitchen side by side. Despite the distracted demeanor that Will carried through the evening, he engaged fully in conversation, delighted in the meal, and did not immediately run off to have time to himself for the evening. Hannibal had been expecting a self-imposed isolation period from Will after the day prior, but his willingness to return unprompted and within such a short time frame pleased him. Will was displaying a great deal of trust.

They retired to the study for the evening. Hannibal observed the other as he busied himself with building a fire, while he himself settled into a chair with his iPad. He may read, but he was expecting a discussion. Will had been self-soothing all evening. Touching his own face, his hair, rubbing his hand on his thigh, broken briefly by the act of eating and the process of cleaning. His behavior increased once more until he found something to do with his hands, in this case the hearth. He appreciated the other's decision to build a fire knowing full well it was Hannibal's childhood comfort, even if he was doing it as a stress relief and to create a buffer to ease a conversation that he was expecting to be a bad one.

Hannibal decided he would read until Will spoke up. If he insisted on silently worrying himself rather than speaking up, he would ask before Will finally ran off to bed.

The other rose from his position on the floor once he was satisfied with the strength of the fire. Hannibal glanced up at him and smiled, as if innocent to the implications of Will's behavior, then returned to his article. Will stood still for a few brief moments, then awkwardly walked over to his usual chair and sat. He planted his feet firmly, leaned back, and gripped the arms of the chair, much in the same manner he often did during their conversations at the office. He was preparing himself.

"We should talk about yesterday," Will said eventually, staring straight ahead rather than looking over. Hannibal turned his iPad's screen off, closed the cover, then softly set it on the small table next to his chair. His full attention was then given to Will, but he waited until the other spoke again. "I … didn't mean to act that way."

Hannibal almost grinned, but he resisted. Instead, he kept his face neutral and prodded, "You regret initiating a physical relationship?"

That earned him a look, one of confusion and consideration, as Will studied his face. "It was an inappropriate moment to want to have sex."

“I beg to differ,” Hannibal said. Whatever Will had been expecting, it was not that, and he let out a disbelieving laugh. Instead of letting him argue, Hannibal continued, “You had a very strong reaction to the situation, Will. It is not uncommon for someone with clear signs of an attachment disorder to overreact in situations where their sole support system is threatened. Compounded with your pure empathy and my own--”

“Don’t,” Will huffed out as he lifted his hands in a ‘stop’ gesture.

Hannibal gave him one simple nod, acquiescing to his request. Will lowered his hands, but when he didn’t continue speaking after his command to stop, Hannibal tried a different approach. “Will, it would be hypocritical of me to judge you for an act that we both had equal part in. Should we discuss what led to your initiating a physical connection you have otherwise shown little interest in?”

Will glanced at him once again, a furrow in his brow. Hannibal waited, studying the way his face changed minutely with each thought, with each wall he needed to peer over, until his eyes drifted away once again, to the fire.

“I just needed to feel you. To make sure you were alive. With me,” Will said after a long moment, his tone almost flat. Reluctant.

“And you believe wanting me will drive me away from you?” Hannibal asked, curious to know, but keeping his voice calm and measured. The other shook his head no. “Logic is no answer to passion, Will. You were faced with the very real possibility of my loss and I with my own mortality. We partook in a celebration of life.”

“Over the loss of a life,” Will pointed out, ever eager to find fault in his actions.

Hannibal hummed softly. He had a point, but it was the wrong one as far as he was concerned. “Is his death a loss? One could compare his death to Hobbs’ own, a death which you believe to be just.”

“Brown’s death is just,” Will agreed, leaning forward to put his elbows on his knees and his head in his hands, rubbing his face. When he spoke again, his tone was more forceful. Full of conviction, as if he felt that he had to convince Hannibal that what he had done was wrong. “It still doesn’t make it okay, Hannibal. You’d been drugged. Tied up. Almost stabbed.”

Hannibal smiled at Will. “You are punishing yourself for what you believe to be an act of selfishness. We have had this conversation, have we not?” The other only nodded his acknowledgement. “For fear of sounding more like a therapist than a partner, it would please me if you worked on this, Will. Never assume I will be upset with you for choosing yourself and your needs.”

He watched as the other man’s demeanor changed, loosened. Will eventually let his eyes track over towards Hannibal, who kept the amused smile on his face. The expression was returned with the real smile Will saved for him, then the wonderful sound of Will’s laugh lit up the space between them.

“Partner?”

“Yes,” Hannibal said, then tilted his head slightly, curious to see Will’s reaction to what he would say next. “Unless you believe we are entwined in a ‘situationship.’”

“Shut the hell up,” he said with another laugh, full bellied. Full of relief with the knowledge that he had not been judged. That he would not be pushed away. That he did not need to push Hannibal away first in order to keep from being hurt.

Hannibal couldn’t help but fondly capture the moment, before turning away to pick his iPad back up. He returned to his article and Will returned to tending the fire. When he noticed the other had settled himself on the floor in front of the fireplace rather than returning to his chair, he decided he would join him as he had done in the past. It was purely selfish on his part, but he suspected Will was waiting for him. He set his article aside and rose from his seat, moving over to the other. After threading his fingers through brown curls, he lowered himself beside Will and stretched his legs out. To his delight, his newly declared partner leaned into him as they watched the flames dance.

“Your wrists?” Will asked.

“Merely bruised. They will heal,” Hannibal said, laying his cheek against Will’s head.

“If I hadn’t killed Brown, he could have given us the Ripper. This could be over,” the other said, frustration brimming in his words. Hannibal turned his head to kiss Will’s.

“Regardless, it will be over soon,” he reassured. “His actions are becoming those of a man who is desperate.”

“Desperate men make mistakes,” Will mused, then heaved a heavy sigh. Hannibal rubbed his face into the other’s curls, feeling their softness, smelling his scent unsullied by sickness and the hours that allowed Alana’s perfume to fade. He smiled to himself as he hummed a sound of agreement. He would rid Will of his stresses soon enough, now that his attachment was solid. Now that it was something he would not feel the need to pull away from when he no longer felt his own safety threatened.

Hannibal closed his eyes, enjoying the heat from the flames, the warmth of the body leaning against his own, the companionship. If he was not sure it would harm Will’s willingness to return to him, he would indulge himself, run his lips along the other’s neck, nipping his pulse through his soft skin. Instead, he gently took Will’s hand in his own and stood, guiding him to stand with him. The screen for the fireplace was closed and they made their way upstairs, killing lights as they went. When changing for bed, Hannibal saw the moment Will noticed that all of his clothes were in the closet, but he did not mention it. Once in bed, they fit together as always, Hannibal wrapped around behind Will, an arm over him, hand over his heart, the unspoken promise to keep him safe. As he always did, Hannibal waited until he felt the other’s breath slow and deepen, his body release the tensions he carried even when at ease, before he allowed himself to begin drifting off to sleep.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 01:43

Will sat across the table from Matthew, his dark hair and pale skin framed by the wall of herbs, his eyes dark, beady. Boring into him. The sound of a door opening caught Will's attention but he dared not look away, not for a single moment. A shadow of a beast crossed the greenery, the harsh coppery scent of blood suddenly strong. From the head of the table, shadow black limbs reached out, dishes in hand, to serve both him and Matthew, a third. Wine, sour and pungent, was poured in three glasses. The loud creaking of wood cut the silence as the stag man seated itself.

A smirk cut across Matthew's otherwise dead expression as he picked up his silverware, blindly cutting into the food on his plate, refusing to turn his black eyes away. Will watched as a hand, thumb and forefinger only to grip the fork, lifted a still bleeding bite to his mouth. Teeth sunk in, his lips pulling back into a sneer as blood ran down his chin. Will finally tore his gaze away, to the stag, who mirrored Matthew in his actions but not his expression. He paid no mind to his own food sat before him.

"We are meant to honor them. We have to eat," Abigail. Will looked to the other side of himself to see her, cheeks pink with life, scarred neck now pristine as if she had never suffered at the hand of her father. She sat next to him, a pleasant smile on her face, fork held in her hand in example to Will.

"Honor … who?" He heard himself ask, his body moving on its own to pick his utensils up.

"Them," she said, her eyes flicking from Will to the stag, her expression changing from pleasant to fearful as she did.

"Your father, he honored victims," he pointed out. Her gaze fell back on him and the fear washed away, a sad smile left in its wake. "Not killers."

"But *it* is not my father," She stated, taking a bite of her own to taste. "As much as you wanted it to be that way."

Will looked down at his plate. Raw, deep red organs. He cut into his meat then brought it to his own lips. He placed it on his tongue, drawing the strong, bitter taste into his mouth. He savored the way the organ burst between his teeth with each chew, almost dissolving as he swallowed. A snort, a puff of air came from the stag man, more animal than human, but it was the sound of approval nonetheless. This food was unlike the ear. This was *good*.

"I wanted you to have a normal life," Will said after he finished his bite, the taste fading quickly as it hit him.

"You wanted to prove that a monster can have a normal life," Abigail spoke with sympathy, taking another bite, the blood painting her lips red. "You thought you needed me for that, but you didn't."

A light, bright and painful, crossed his vision. Will closed his eyes and rubbed them, then turned his attention away from Abigail, back to the stag man. It sat, its attention focused on him, expression as lifeless as it had ever been, but he could feel it reaching out to him, needing him. Matthew held out his uninjured hand, an offering. Will looked over to see his

severed fingers laying across his palm, the smirk still upon his face. Another bright light flashed and he closed his eyes tighter, refusing to open them again.

He felt fingers pulling against his eyelids and he pulled back, harshly.

When he finally opened his eyes, he could see the stag man had risen from its place at the head of the table. It was behind Matthew now, a claw sliding across the flesh of his neck, a smooth, clean line giving way to the spray of arterial blood. Its voice, untethered to a corporeal form, spoke within him, both accented and foreign, familiar and unknown, languages layered as it did. *A necessary sacrifice,* he knew it meant to say.

"Will," he heard, this time outside of himself. The light returned a third time. He tried to turn away from it but his head was held still. He shut his eyes tight. "Do you remember what you are to say when you lose time?"

"What?" He could hear his own voice ask, a loud whisper. Will took in a sharp breath and opened his eyes. Hannibal was within inches of his face, one hand on his head, a light in the other. He looked around, almost frantically. They were in the dining room. He'd just been there, but it was different. Lighter. A faint chemical cleaner smell lingered, just as it had during dinner, the scent of blood now gone.

"It is 1:43 in the morning. I need you to tell me where we are and who you are," Hannibal softly commanded and his grip on Will loosened. He clicked the small flashlight off and set it down on the table.

"Uh, I'm… It--it's 1:43 AM. We are in Baltimore, Maryland. My name is Will Graham," he said after a few more moments spent gathering himself. He was in his pajamas, sitting in a chair. Hannibal was between him and the table, leaning against it, a robe on over his pajamas. "Am I sleepwalking again?"

"It appears so, yes," Hannibal said, moving his hand to the other's forehead. "No fever. You dreamt?"

"Of Abigail," he admitted. "And Brown."

"An active mind, processing your traumas," the doctor suggested. He ran fingers through Will's hair, then leaned forward to press his lips to his forehead. A verification of temperature, more intimate than the hand. "Come back to bed."

Will leaned into the touch, then stood. Hannibal followed as they made their way back up the stairs, back to the bed. It was still warm as Will slid under the blankets; he must not have been up for very long. He laid against Hannibal, this time facing him, his head on his chest so that he could hear his heartbeat. It was something to focus on, to distract himself, rather than thinking of the taste of raw liver on his lips. As if Hannibal knew what he needed, he began to speak in his mother tongue, words slurred lightly with sleepiness. Will listened to words he could not understand and allowed himself to relax, to drop off into slumber once more.

distantia

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; MONDAY, 09:15

The offices were already abandoned when Will walked in, everyone else already hard at work in the lab. He took his time putting his bag at his desk and turning his computer on, checking emails that he'd avoided all weekend, pulling up the most up-to-date files on Matthew Brown that had been compiled since Saturday. It seemed like so far, four missing persons had been connected to items found in his apartment and two unsolved murders. Will skimmed the information about the two murder victims; neither had anything in their systems beyond a normal level of alcohol, and both had been strangled. Brown most likely picked them up at bars or waited until they were walking home drunk. It built on his profile: a killer who preferred his victims under the influence of some substance, a way to feel like he had full control. It explained why he would jump from opportunistic victims to drugging his victims, as he escalated with each kill. He just had to learn that he could get away with stealing sedatives from his work and form the belief that he was untouchable.

It didn't explain why he wouldn't fully drug Hannibal. It didn't explain why he said something about Will not being ready for the Ripper.

Will sighed. If he had just shot him once and disarmed him, they could be getting answers. Descriptions, names.

He stood from his desk and made his way into the lab. Beverly had her face buried in a microscope. Jimmy was sorting through what looked like fly making gear. Brian was at the back of the room, a mask on his face, looming over what looked like an assortment of rotting animals. He grabbed some disposable gloves and put them on as he crossed the lab, curious to see what he was doing, saying quick greetings to Bev and Jimmy as he passed.

Once there, Will noted the pictures set up above each animal, all in their own states of decay. The photographs appeared to be from Brown's apartment, yellow number placards indicating which was which, the photos showing how infested with bugs they had been at the scene. Brian glanced up at Will with raised eyebrows, a silent question.

"Necropsies?" Will asked, knowing the answer already.

"Documenting his practice," Brian answered. "Low priority but necessary."

"This all of them?"

"All eight. All look like they're less than two weeks old," he said, pointing at the far end of the table where a rotten carcass lay, which looked like a pile of skin, bones, and soft tissue that was just beginning to show signs of oncoming liquification.

"Must be when he started helping the Ripper," Will muttered, crossing his arms over his chest as he leaned in to look at what appeared to have been a groundhog, its stomach sliced open

and body cavity emptied. Beside it lay each of its organs, laid out in the same way shown in the photograph sitting above it. “Any of the animals missing organs?”

“No. All are accounted for,” Brian answered.

“No signs of cannibalism for any of Brown’s known victims?”

“Nope.”

Will nodded then stepped back, giving Brian his space again. Brown believed he was helping the Ripper at first, rather than being used. He had been practicing, thinking they would form some kind of companionship, perhaps even begin murdering together. A lonely psychopath. Will wondered if he often spent time with his victims, much like he spent time speaking with Hannibal. He wondered if his goal was to cut fingers from Hannibal yet leave him alive to be found, and to take him as the Ripper had once taken him, as a way of getting revenge against him for the slight of being a pawn in his plans rather than a literal partner in crime.

He walked back over towards Beverly, stopping briefly to look at the fly making gear Jimmy was documenting. It wasn’t the same as his own, but it was similar enough that he could have picked it out from pictures off of Tattlecrime and tried to match the same equipment. When he made it to where Beverly was, she sat back from her microscope and made a few notes on a paper before turning her attention to him.

“Hey,” she said, once again using that damn talking-to-a-victim tone. “I didn’t think you’d be here.”

“No where else to be,” Will said flatly.

“Key West, Belize, Greece, Italy,” she began listing places off, sarcasm drifting into her tone.

“Okay, okay,” he cut her off, forcing a smile. “You know what I mean. No where else I can go to figure this shit out.”

“There’s always Key West, Belize, Greece, Italy,” Beverly said with a smirk. “It’s not like you can’t look at the files and dossiers remotely.”

“It’s not the same,” he muttered. Will rubbed his eyes under his glasses and sighed, frustrated.

“Have you seen Lounds’ new theory?” Beverly asked, returning to her microscope.

“No, I don’t follow her trash.”

“Hm. I think she’s on to something,” she said, half distracted sounding as she jotted something else down on her notes. “She thinks it’s someone within the FBI, or close enough to know the details of crime scenes no one else does.”

Will studied Beverly as she peered through the eyepiece of her microscope once again. He had theorized--well, he had known--that the copycat, now confirmed to be the Chesapeake Ripper himself, had intimate knowledge of active and unsolved crime scenes, but the

assumption was that he either knew the other killers or that he closely followed the media, Tattlecrime included. The addition of Brown, a killer unknown to the authorities, gave credence to his theory that the Ripper knew, or at least knew of, other killers. To know the cases from within too…

He stripped his gloves off despite not touching anything, then reached into his pocket and got his phone out. He pulled Tattlecrime up and scrolled through the front page until he saw an article titled *In Plain Sight: Is the Chesapeake Ripper a Well Known Figure?* He clicked it and began scanning the article. She claimed he wasn't some item of romantic interest, but a pawn in the Ripper's cat and mouse game with Jack, that she too had fallen for some of his manipulations and published misdirections, that whoever it was knew of intimate details from cases for the past several years. What Lounds wrote, to his disdain, made sense.

"Jack aware?" He asked.

"Mmmmhm," she hummed an affirmative. "He's making a list, going to check it twice. I wouldn't hold my breath though. Whoever it is will figure it out and lay low."

"The Ripper is nothing if not patient," he said as he turned his phone screen off and put it away. "He'll go inactive again until suspicions die down, if it's true."

"Which will just be proof," Beverly said.

"Maybe then he won't," Will said as he got up. If Jack truly was making a list of agents and consultants who had worked on Chesapeake Ripper cases, then maybe he could find Miriam's list of physicians who had been involved in early victims. If he couldn't, he'd make his own. Then he could cross-reference the two and narrow everything down to a neat, short list of suspects.

Will left the lab. He made his way to Jack's office, where he paused to knock on the door. The man granted permission to enter, and Will pulled the door open and walked inside. Jack glanced up from whatever he was reading on his desk, and Will immediately saw his face fall before he steeled himself. That meant bad news. Will threw himself down into a seat before it was offered to him.

"Did Miriam Lass ever provide you with a copy of her list of physicians?" Will asked. "If so, why didn't you follow up once she went missing?"

"You're off the case," Jack said, his voice serious. "This case and all cases for the foreseeable future."

"You couldn't have called me and saved me a trip down here?" He asked with a grimace. Of course Jack could have, he simply chose not to. He'd want one last conversation to ask for theories or to tell him he could keep working on the case off the record, off the books. A face-to-face conversation to get an agreement to bend the rules to get what he wanted.

"This wasn't my decision, Will," the older man said, leaning back in his chair to give Will a stern look. "If it were up to me, I'd keep you close. But Prurnell believes there's too many

coincidences to explain and that keeping you on the case will complicate it further. She doesn't understand why you wouldn't want a protection detail."

"They couldn't keep my house secure. It would just be a waste of resources," Will argued. "The coincidences are planned out, purposeful choices made by the Ripper, Jack."

"The rushed psych eval that got you back on the job was something else she flagged, and now she won't authorize another. Can't pass an evaluation, we can't have you on any cases," Jack said. "Officially, that is."

There it was. Will was still on leave from the academy, and he assumed they'd keep it that way until they could review him for the next semester. Now, he was being told he couldn't actually consult with cases, but Jack would still use him if he'd allow it. The Ripper had taken his home, and with it his dogs, his kidney, and now *both* of his jobs, which meant he'd then lose any acquaintances he had. Will was self-aware enough to know that even Beverly would stop talking to him once he wasn't a physical presence. The only thing he hadn't taken was Hannibal, and that was only because he had yet to do it.

Will rose from his seat. He started off towards the door, but he stopped. Jack sat waiting for some kind of answer, so Will turned to stare at him, to look him in the eye. "If he kills Hannibal because I couldn't be here to help solve this case, I will burn everything in my wake."

"Will," Jack started, but Will turned around and left the office. He went to his desk, grabbing his bag and keys. Before he left, he went over to Beverly's desk and wrote a quick note, telling her he was off all cases. He then made his way outside, but instead of heading to his car, he walked to the building his classroom was in. Whether there was an active lecture or not, he wanted to get his shit take it home. Once in the right building, Will stopped by the supply room and threw reels of paper out of their boxes and left them on the shelf. He took the two boxes with him and made his way down the hall to his classroom, relieved to find he wouldn't have to make a scene since the room was empty. He began throwing books and folders into the boxes, checking the cabinets for anything personal to throw in before he put the lids on, stacked the two boxes, and made his way back to his car with them in hand.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 12:01

A distraction and a new course of action were what he needed. Frederick Chilton had wasted part of his weekend on nonsense brought on by none other than his godforsaken director position at the Baltimore State Hospital for the Criminally Insane and Gideon's posthumous drama that just wouldn't end. What he needed at this moment was for Will Graham to uphold his side of their deal, so he could begin publishing papers that he would ultimately turn into a book. The poor guy had as much going on as he did, so it could only serve as a distraction to the both of them. Frederick picked his office phone up and dialed Graham's number after double checking to make sure he had it right.

It rang several times before it went to voice mail. Frederick frowned. He hung up, then opened his desk drawer to take his cell phone out. He called him once more.

There were two rings before he heard a gruff, “What?” come across the line. Graham seemed to be in as good a mood as he always was.

“Good afternoon, Mr. Graham,” Frederick said, purposefully cheery to show he was not affected by the man’s demeanor. “I was wondering if you had a moment to talk.”

“Okay,” was all he got as a response.

Frederick took in a deep breath, quietly enough the line wouldn’t pick it up, then he continued on in his happy tone. “We had an agreement. It’s been quite some time and I am just following up to see when you will be available to hold up your end of our deal.”

There was a long silence over the line. Then, “You’ve got shit timing, Chilton.”

“Mm, yes. I am fully aware of what has befallen you and Dr. Lecter,” Frederick said. “Which is why I’m reiterating my services to you. Services you agreed to use, at least three times. He is what? Your partner, boyfriend?”

“Something like that.”

“Then it’s unethical for him to be your psychiatrist. I’m offering my services. Free of charge. We can trial out the first three sessions that have already been agreed upon, and we can continue from there if you feel I am a good match for you,” he offered.

“Opportunistic. Narcissistic. Lack of empathy,” Will began listing off, then he laughed, catching Frederick off guard. “Do you plan on utilizing the same tactics you used on Gideon?”

“Mr. Graham, I was accused by a man with no credibility, and only after Dr. Bloom put the idea into his head,” the doctor said with a sigh, loud enough this time for Will to hear. “Why don’t we discuss this over lunch tomorrow? My treat.”

There was another pause in conversation, but Frederick waited. He didn’t want to seem too pushy, but he wanted this. No, he needed this. A chance to change his career path without the disgrace of stepping down from his position beforehand. An excuse to say, ‘well, my fame and busy schedule make it difficult to maintain my position here at the BSHCI.’ He was sure Will would be closed off at first, but he was confident he could convince the man he had only good intentions behind his interest in him as a subject of study.

“Fine.”

A short but sweet answer. The one he wanted. “Good, thank you. I shall make arrangements and let you know where to meet me.”

The supposed empath on the other end of the line grunted out something that sounded like an agreement, then the line went dead. Frederick frowned briefly at his cell phone, then smiled to himself as he put it away. The first steps are always the most difficult. He briefly wondered what kind of place a man such as Will Graham would feel most comfortable dining at, but he decided it wouldn’t matter. It was just to discuss when and where they would meet, in public,

where he'd be more likely to be agreeable. In the meantime, it was his lunch time today, so he rose from his desk and made his way out of his office, towards the employee lounge.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; MONDAY, 17:00

Always on time, on whatever day of his choosing, there came a knock on her door. After a reasonable delay, Bedelia rose from her dining room table. She smoothed her dress down and adjusted her hair, then put her shoulders back and head up to put on an air of confidence, then she picked up her wine glass and made her way to the front door. She unlocked it, slow enough to ensure her unwanted guest would hear the metal sliding into its slot, then she swung the door open. Before her stood Hannibal Lecter, a wine bottle nestled gently in his arm and a neutral, people-pleasing smile on his face. She stepped aside, pulling the door open farther with her as an invitation for him to enter.

"Good evening," she greeted. He nodded his head at her and stepped inside, waiting until she closed the door to hold the wine out towards her.

"A pleasant evening, indeed," he said with that sickeningly pleasant tone of his. She smiled up at him, taking the bottle from him and reading the label. It was an expensive bottle, as always. Bedelia offered him a thankful look.

"Would you like to share a glass?" She asked, leading him farther inside.

"No, thank you," was his response. Bedelia led him to her living room, where he took his usual seat. She excused herself to put the wine away, then poured more of her open bottle into the glass she had been nursing so she could drink more, back down to the level it had been, before she returned to the room with him.

Bedelia seated herself, crossed one leg over the other, then leaned forward to set her glass on a coaster on her coffee table. He sat in his seat across from her, watching her like a hawk behind his mask. Enjoying his hold he had on her, how obediently she waits for him, even when he hasn't visited for weeks. She sat back, putting on a relaxed yet proper disposition, and she smiled at him. "And how has my favorite patient been?"

"I am your only patient," Hannibal pointed out, although she could tell he was teasing. A good-natured attempt at humanity.

"That you are. It doesn't change your status," she joked back gently.

"I should hope not," he said, his lips curling ever so slightly into a smile. Bedelia waited, noting his sudden change as his gaze drifted off. He spoke up then, his tone changed, more neutral. "I come to you a version of myself who has found a true companion."

Had he appreciated her honesty so many weeks ago when she pointed out his human suit, or was his statement a jab at her? Bedelia kept her face calm, shifting slightly to pick her wine glass up and take a slow, careful sip. After swallowing, she asked, "Your friend, Will Graham?"

“My partner, Will Graham,” he said, returning his eye contact. Eager to see her reaction.

“Then it’s a good thing you did not give up on him,” she said, referencing their last conversation, the one before the news broke that the special agent had gone missing from his transport van. “You successfully saved him?”

Hannibal watched her, and she could tell he was considering his answer. Filtering it, much slower than he often did. He was allowing the tension to sit between them, for whatever reason he chose. Perhaps to decide whether or not she knew his level of involvement in the younger man’s dropped murder charges. She purposefully did not follow the news about Will Graham, as it would make conversations like this easier to navigate.

“Yes,” Hannibal finally said.

“He views it the same way?” She asked, careful not to push too far.

Tilting his head slightly, Hannibal’s smile returned. “He has yet to accept it. He believes that his involvement in my life puts me in danger.”

“I would have to agree with Will,” Bedelia said, giving him a knowing look. “Any involvement with authorities has the potential to lead to uncontrollable situations.”

“His involvement with authorities is waning,” Hannibal informed her.

She offered him another overly pleasant smile, leaning back in her chair to sip her wine once more. Whatever she chose to say in regard to her last point would be lost on Hannibal. Instead, she pivoted. “We once spoke of your impulse to step forward with Will. Is there a reason you chose not to take a step back?”

“I missed him,” was his simple answer.

“This is rare for you,” Bedelia pointed out.

“I believed, for a majority of my life, that that particular feeling was reserved for a singular person,” Hannibal explained. He paused, but she dared not speak. She instead waited for him to elaborate. “I chose to leap forward, foregoing steps.”

“Loss is difficult to navigate,” she assured him. He dipped his chin in agreement. “What can be harder to navigate is a loss after a mutual attachment. Does Will see you now as he always will?”

“Will sees in me what I see in him.”

“He may see and feel the world differently than others, including yourself. There is no guarantee that Will has the same … *interests*,” she said, and they both knew what she meant but would never say. Hannibal tapped his fingers on his knee, the slightest sign that what she said had not yet occurred to him. She pushed further, “He has aligned himself with law enforcement his entire adult life, which speaks to a moral code. Does his moral code have the potential to overshadow his emotional attachments?”

A light twitch of his upper lip before he returned to his neutral, pleasant mask. “Will has sought out structure and reassurance.”

“Which you can provide.” Bedelia understood then. She smiled at Hannibal, a sad, worrying smile. “I hope for his sake and yours that he is able to accept it.”

“As do I,” Hannibal agreed.

Bedelia held her wine glass up to Hannibal, a silent question to once again ask if he’d like a glass. He shook his head no once, politely, and she sipped the last of her glass. She rose then and he followed her lead. They walked to her kitchen, where she poured the last of her bottle into her glass. She no longer wished for their conversation to follow a strict patient-psychiatrist relationship, and the change from their normal seats to her kitchen would help Hannibal to understand this.

“As a colleague and a friend,” she started, leaning against her counter and crossing one arm over herself, the other hand holding the glass up, a guarded stance, “I hope things work out between you two. As your psychiatrist, I have to remind you that Will is his own person. As much as we believe we can, we can never be truly certain of what another person will do.”

“We can feed the caterpillar and whisper through the chrysalis, but what hatches follows its own nature,” Hannibal mused. Bedelia nodded in agreement.

“Whatever you believe you’ve convinced him of, don’t punish him if he sees and feels different from you,” she said. Hannibal stepped closer to her and reached out with both hands. She forced herself to stay relaxed, looking up at him, keeping direct eye contact. He placed a hand on each of her shoulders, and despite the smile on his face, his large frame, his deviation from his normal demeanor around her was alarming.

“You are a good friend, Bedelia. A good friend and a wonderful psychiatrist,” he gently squeezed her shoulders, then his hands dropped from her. She watched as Hannibal turned to leave and she waited, her breath held until she heard the click of her front door being shut. Her wine glass was spilled into her sink and she realized she hadn’t been breathing. Bedelia gasped in a breath, then she went to her door to lock not only the deadbolt, but her chain as well.

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Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 12:09

Will walked into The Capital Grille, a restaurant chosen by Chilton that he never would have. He was a few minutes late but couldn't find it in himself to care, as he wasn't really sure why he even agreed to this. The initial agreement was a trade, but both he and Hannibal had assumed after their dinner with the man weeks ago, he would have realized it was never going to happen. Chilton apparently had impeccable timing though and he caught Will on a day he that was angry at Jack, at his own circumstances, so here he was. Standing in a small waiting area while a hostess gave him a forced smile, judging him for his plaid button up and off the rack khakis. Probably his unruly hair too. After he told her who he was meeting, she led him to a table where Chilton already sat studying a menu.

When he saw Will, he stood and reached a hand out to shake. Will just smiled at him and sat in his own chair, leaving the other man to awkwardly take his hand back and sit, a brief flash of disdain on his face. Will smiled at him, overly friendly, teetering on sarcastic.

"Thank you for meeting me here, Mr. Graham," the doctor said.

"Hannibal advised me against it. Called you a particularly *pushy* man," Will responded as he picked up his own menu, focusing his attention on it rather than the man across from him.

"One doesn't make it far in life without knowing what he has to do to achieve his goals," Chilton said smoothly, if not a bit defensively. He shifted then, leaning forward so he could lower his voice but still be heard. "You and I are victims, Mr. Graham, both directly and indirectly of the Chesapeake Ripper. I would suggest that you put aside whatever problem with me you have so that we can both benefit and have a chance at moving on. Alive."

He knew Chilton was right. Will set his menu down and looked at the man. He was scared, masking it with confidence and what should be anger but seemed more like pissiness. Will considered him for a few moments, then leaned in as well in a conspiratorial way. "You know he gutted Gideon like Gideon gutted you, only without any surgical skill."

The reaction he got was the one he expected. Disgust, discomfort. Chilton leaned back, sitting more properly in his chair and he picked his menu back up to avoid looking at Will. "Hardly the talk for lunch, Mr. Graham."

"So how will this work?" Will asked. After a brief interruption by the waitress to provide him with water and ask if either gentlemen wanted anything else to drink, he turned his attention back to the doctor.

"You're well aware of your … *status* as a subject of interest as it pertains to your ability to read crime scenes, empathize with murderers," Chilton began, finally looking back up at the

other. “It’s all very dark. I’m tired of dark. I want to move past this chapter in my life. Very few people with your flavor of empathy disorder make it into adulthood. I’d like to study you to help others. *Living* others.”

Will frowned and looked down. “You said you had other people to study.”

“Not yet. I will,” he said confidently. “If you are willing to cooperate, I believe others will come forward.”

“You want to name me,” Will pointed out, irritated now. That was never in the deal, but of course Chilton would try to change the terms after the fact.

“It would be beneficial,” Chilton said.

“For you,” he muttered as the waitress returned. She took their orders, Chilton opting for a vegetarian dish, Will for a light dish of grilled chicken and roast vegetables. Both men were missing kidneys, after all. It was an awkward reminder, so he forced himself to calm down. He couldn’t blame the man if he wanted out of the business of dealing with the criminally insane, even if he thought his only way out was through using him.

“How about this?” Chilton leveled his gaze at Will now, folding his hands into one another as he leaned against the table. “You give me the three sessions. I write a paper where you are not named as the subject, but mentioned in context. Once it’s published, if it’s received well and there is enough interest, if more individuals come forward with the desire to participate in the study, then you can decide if you want to continue helping.”

“Three sessions,” Will agreed. “Then we’ll see.”

“Good,” Chilton said with a toothy smile. “It will be a good opportunity, Mr. Graham. A man like yourself, who has dedicated your adult life to helping victims, should be honored to help. This could be good for *living* people who struggle to navigate an overwhelming world.”

Will only hummed a non-committal noise. “When and where?”

“Evenings, if possible. I do have a demanding job,” the doctor said, frowning to himself. “Shall we start this week? Once a week for three weeks.”

“Not Tuesdays or Fridays,” Will said. Those were Hannibal’s evenings. His nights to discuss things that bothered him, knowing Hannibal understood and wouldn’t judge, nor bring them up outside of their sessions.

“Thursday then,” Chilton declared. “We’ll use the office in my home. Eight in the evening?”

“Sure,” he agreed. Thankfully the waitress returned with their meals. Will set about eating quickly, wanting this meeting to come to an end so that he could get home. Frederick Chilton and his desire to separate himself fully from the Chesapeake Ripper was a low priority for Will. He had cases to go through, cases he had shown students and taught them how to see the patterns. He had messages to send to Beverly, to ask her for updates about Brown’s case, if they found anything new, anything that would show he had previously worked with any

other killers. He had a list of physicians who treated Olmstead to locate, or to put together on his own, so he could retrace Miriam's last known steps before she went missing.

QUANTICO, VIRGINIA; TUESDAY, 14:23

Freddie had postponed her visit to the FBI. She spent her Monday going through her old photographs, articles, notes, tapes, and whatever else she had to compile a list of who she suspected could either be aiding the Ripper or who could actually be the Ripper. Speaking with Jack Crawford, or whoever he put in a room with her, could prove useful. She could get information out of them while providing them with little to none about why she had been at Brown's apartment. The why was easy; his address was publicly listed and he was killed by Will Graham. The how was simple enough; she climbed through a window, but she wouldn't admit to that. The when could be a vague answer, and they wouldn't press for more. All Crawford wanted was to intimidate her to try to keep her from publishing information that the public needed to know to keep themselves safe.

She pulled into the parking lot and took a brief moment to check herself in the rear-view mirror. Her hair looked good, her makeup clean. She pulled her purse from the passenger seat into her lap and opened it up, taking a recording device out and turning it on. If they found it, they found it. If not, she'd have this whole interaction with the FBI on tape and wouldn't have to rely on just her memory. The walk into the building went fine. The bag check and metal detector went just as well. She was handed her guest badge and an agent escorted her down the halls, to the BAU halls, to a small room where she was asked to sit at a metal table. The agent left and Freddie put her purse up on the table, glad her recording device had been left alone.

Time ticked by. Freddie glanced at her watch. She took her phone out. No signal. She sighed and reached into her bag, turning the recorder off just in case she was in there too long.

As if they knew as soon as she turned it off, the door opened. Freddie frowned and quickly tried to turn the device back on, but Jack's voice boomed.

"Miss Lounds! Glad you could finally make it," he said, entering the room and closing the door behind him. She noticed he had a folder in his hand, non-descript, devoid of any FBI markings on it. It wasn't even the same color as their normal folders were.

"I had a busy day yesterday," she said with a smile. The man walked over to her and motioned like he was going to take her bag, raising his eyebrows at her. With a frown, she threw her hands up in admitted defeat and leaned back in her chair. Jack pulled the purse over to him and peeked inside, pulling the recording device out. He noted it wasn't on, which seemed to satisfy him. He sat across from her, leaving the recorder on the table as he pushed her purse back towards her. The folder was set on the table in front of him.

"Nothing of note happened yesterday," Jack challenged.

"That explains why you have such a dismal track record without the help of your wonder boy. Collecting information doesn't stop, Agent Crawford," Freddie said with a smirk, crossing

her arms over her chest. He smiled back, amused.

“No, it doesn’t,” he agreed. “I have a request, Miss Lounds.”

She tilted her head slightly, curious. A request for her, obviously off the record if no other agents were present and he didn’t want the conversation recorded. A conversation he wanted to have in an isolated area, where ears couldn’t hear. Her interest was piqued.

“If you’re going to tell me to stop visiting crime scenes, I’m going to have to decline. It’s my bread and butter,” Freddie deflected to downplay her interest.

“That’s a standing request, one I know you’ll ignore,” Jack said. “I actually want you to write an article for me.”

“About?”

“The Chesapeake Ripper. I want to provoke him,” Jack admitted, his tone turning more serious. “Between your accusations that it’s someone working within our ranks, his use of other killers, and his copying of other crimes, I don’t believe there is a way to flush him out without pissing him off.”

“So I’m to put myself at risk for you to get some extra clues you won’t be able to connect to anything else,” Freddie objected, sitting up to lean in closer. “You can’t even protect your own.”

“We can put you somewhere safe,” he said easily, reassuringly. “He’s a narcissist, and that’s his biggest flaw. I want you to write an article that says you’ve come across information that breaks the case wide open. I want you to claim that the Chesapeake Ripper isn’t a single man, but a group of killers. Lay it on thick as you do with Will. Insults, belittlement. You can even throw a few jabs my way.”

“I take it you can’t figure out why he used Brown,” Freddie noted. She glanced down at the folder and Jack must have noticed, because he slid it across the table towards her. She picked it up and opened it, leafing through the pages to take in bits of information just so she understood what she was being given. It contained information about the Minnesota Shrike, about Gideon, Brown’s own kills, Ripper displays, Graham and Lass’ disappearance and the discovery of her arm. There was also a list of active, nicknamed serial killers not yet caught in areas where Ripper victims were found outside of Baltimore. There were notes and sample articles for her to use as drafts, quotes from ‘sources.’

“He will want to prove to us that he’s the only person capable of doing what he does,” Jack said ominously once Freddie closed the folder and tucked it into her purse.

“You’re confident he’ll do it soon? Won’t wait years like he did to flaunt Lass?” She asked, genuinely curious now. The Ripper was patient and he had already been a practiced killer by the time he started making public displays.

“If he’s desperate enough to use the help of a sloppy killer, then he’s on some time crunch that we’re not aware of yet,” Jack sounded confident in spite of his grim tone. Freddie held

her hand out, asking for her recorder back. The man picked it up and handed it to her.

“If he works here, he’ll know it’s a set up,” she pointed out.

“This is between you and me.”

Freddie stared at him for a few moments, then she put her recorder away and pulled her purse off the table, shouldering it as she stood. “Fine. I’ll write it. But I’ll go somewhere safe on my own. I don’t need some pencil pushing serial killer to see a hotel receipt that gives away my location.”

“Fair enough,” Jack conceded as he stood. He walked to the door and put his hand on the knob, but before he opened it, he turned back to look down at her. “Don’t hold back on Will either. If he really has some infatuation with him and it isn’t a misdirection, it’ll help to anger him.”

“I won’t let you down,” she said with a sweet smile. The agent opened the door for her and allowed her to step out first. No other agents were there, no one to escort her off the premises, but Jack didn’t seem concerned. She glanced back at him as she walked off and he just gave her one nod, a serious look on his face. It wouldn’t be hard to claim that the Ripper was a group of killers. It would actually be easier than explaining how one single man has outsmarted police departments and the FBI for years in spite of his very public, very complex displays. It could also explain the changes in technique, the different locations at the beginning of the Ripper’s known killings, how he’d know about the Shrike and even warn him before he was identified by the FBI.

The reporter in her was itching to throw this new theory out into the world, so Freddie quickly backtracked down the halls until she found where she had entered, until her visitor’s badge was turned in, until she was back outside in her car. Her first task would be to go pick up her laptop and all the information she compiled between Sunday and Monday. Then she would find a nice hotel overlooking some kind of water or mountain where she could post her newest provocative article from.

BALTIMORE, MARYLAND; TUESDAY, 19:00

Hannibal strolled across his office and, right on time, opened the door to the patient waiting room. As expected, his Will stood there, coat folded over one arm, the other hand in his pocket. Waiting for him. He smiled at the younger man and opened the door wide enough to allow him in.

“Good evening, Will. Come in,” he said. Blue eyes caught his own, a smile offered in return, as he took the invitation to come in. Hannibal took the other’s coat from him and hung it up and he, despite their usual protocol for their conversations, set a hand on Will’s hip to stop him. When the other hesitated, Hannibal leaned in and kissed him softly, almost chaste. A greeting between lovers.

The smile on Will's face grew, a genuinely bashful one as he looked down, his reaction coy. It was a sight to see. His rude, angry partner getting flustered over common human affections. Hannibal shut the door and held his arm out, motioning for Will to take a seat. They both settled in their normal chairs, his own legs crossed neatly, hands in his lap, as the other man his usual splayed out self, eager to take up space in a place he felt comfortable. Hannibal couldn't help but keep a light smile on his face, his professional demeanor be damned. Will was his. Fully his, now that Jack had unburdened him of his responsibilities to the Federal Bureau of Investigation. It would only be a matter of time before Will put that life behind him and found himself. The only thing Hannibal had left to do was to introduce his partner to his full self, to allow Will to peer behind the veil, bit by bit, until he could see in him what Hannibal saw in Will.

"You're in a good mood," the empath said, tilting his head in the same manner Hannibal often did when pointing something out and waiting for an explanation. Mirroring. Hannibal's lips pulled back farther, his smile broadening.

"I am, yes," he admitted. "But this is your hour."

"I'd like to start my hour by talking about you. Us," Will clarified quickly. "You're happy I'm off the case."

He couldn't deny this. Hannibal simply nodded his head once and he made no attempt to hide behind a mask of neutrality. "Happy may be a crude word, but apt. You have allowed your psyche to be abused and you have suffered greatly over this past year. I am pleasantly anticipating the introduction of a Will that I have not yet met."

"A Will that is carefree?" Will asked, raising his eyebrows, trying not to look too amused himself. "I hate to break it to you, Dr. Lecter. That Will doesn't exist."

"'The self is not something one finds. It is something one creates,'" Hannibal quoted, then he added, "I am curious what choices you will make when your daily life is not guided by a gruff, domineering agent and the cases he brings you to ease his workload."

"I help people," Will said flatly, taking obvious offense. Unwilling to hide it. Despite displaying clear emotion, he took his eye contact away. He looked behind Hannibal instead of at him. "I can no longer help people. Who can I become?"

"Yourself," Hannibal said succinctly, a single word that was the sum of their entire conversation thus far.

"I'm helping Chilton," Will admitted then with a quick glance back at Hannibal. Looking for reassurance or acceptance, or perhaps a negative reaction.

He employed his facade then, hiding his disappointment from the other. "He requested you allow him more sessions during your luncheon?"

"I offered only his owed sessions."

“Here nor there,” Hannibal said dismissively. “I should be glad you are taking an interest in the world of psychiatry outside of forensics.”

“Yet you aren’t,” Will pointed out. Hannibal watched for any signs of resentment or negativity, but he found none.

“This does not bother you,” Hannibal countered, aiming to draw out a response from him. His reaction. There was a pause, a time where Will seemed to freeze, to go into himself. There was thought there, behind his down turned eyes. Consideration.

Eventually, the younger man rolled one of his shoulders in a half-hearted shrug. Accepting his realization that he did not mind. “You have never shied away from trying to … *guide* me. You might be disappointed in my decisions, but you don’t stop me. You won’t.”

“No,” Hannibal agreed. “I won’t.”

Will looked back up at him then, and Hannibal watched as he was studied, picked apart by him. He wondered then how much Will knew of him, as his conversation with Dr. du Maurier weighed heavily on his mind since they had spoken. There was a desire to ask, to test Will’s acceptance, but instead he pivoted their conversation. “You have left a mess of my study.”

“Old case files. Solved,” Will said, and whatever he had been concentrating on was lost as he averted his gaze once more. “I’ve been thinking.”

“Of?” Hannibal pushed.

“Our friend, the Chesapeake Ripper,” he said with a frown. “Before I took Abigail back to Minnesota, I … I’m pretty sure I mentioned to you that I believed the Ripper knew the cases. Intimately.”

He had. Will had stood in the very room they currently occupied, declaring his sanity, claiming to have lost no time. He had claimed clarity and Hannibal had done what he had to do to convince Will he was looking in the wrong direction. It seemed, with the distance of time, it was now unnecessary. The idea that the Ripper had worked from within had broken containment, and denying it at this point would serve Hannibal no purpose. “I believe at the time, I worried you were succumbing to paranoia. Had I known--”

“No,” Will cut him off. “No, no one knew what the Ripper was doing. You were doing what you knew how to do.”

Hannibal only nodded in response and he stayed silent. He allowed Will to gather his thoughts and return to his original point.

“The Chesapeake Ripper is confirmed to be a copycat. He has no set in stone modus operandi, nothing driving him to kill in a particular way. His only constant is organ harvesting, but … what if it’s not? Could he kill without it being a hunt? How many cases have I taught where a serial killer has admitted to five, six, seven murders but we’ve attributed eight or nine victims to them?”

“If you can find his first kill, you believe you can find him,” Hannibal said, not quite a question but neither an observation.

“If I can find the first case he worked on,” Will amended. Such a smart boy, so close to the truth of the Ripper, but once again looking in the wrong corner for his answers. Hannibal would not correct him.

“This will be hard to do, cut off from the FBI,” he pointed out instead. It only made Will sink into his chair and rub his face with his hands, a look of defeat washing over him. “Perhaps we could step back. Together.”

“And what? Run from it?” Will huffed out.

“Yes,” Hannibal said, calm as ever. “We could leave the Chesapeake Ripper behind. Allow the pieces to fall where they may and begin anew.”

There was that piercing gaze again. Hannibal offered Will a soft smile, a hopeful one. His identity as the Ripper was not something he was married to, despite his pride in his work. If, in order to keep his Will, he had to shed the Ripper as he had shed many of his former selves, he would. Plans had already been set in motion, ones meant to buy time, but amendments could be made. They would be made, if necessary.

“Where would we go?” Will asked eventually, his voice quiet.

“Anywhere,” he offered. “Everywhere.”

Will closed his eyes and nodded, once. “I want to go home.”

Hannibal rose from his chair. He crossed the short distance between them, placed a hand on the back of Will’s neck and leaned down to kiss the crown of his head. The other leaned into him, accepting him, his touches. He helped Will stand and they moved together, to don their coats and turn off lights, to lock up the office so that they could leave as one. Hannibal took Will to his car first, to hold his door for him, to steal one last touch before going to his own car. They would go home. He would feed Will, nourish him, care for him. He would allow Will to mull over his words and suggestion, to internalize and decide. Whatever Will chose, he would not stop him, nor the consequences.

Chapter End Notes

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